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# **BULLETIN OF ECUMENICAL THEOLOGY**

**GOOD NEWS TO  
THE POOR OF AFRICA  
AND THE WORLD**

***MILLENNIUM EDITION***

**PUBLISHED BY  
The Ecumenical Association of Nigerian  
Theologians**



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### NOTE TO CONTRIBUTORS:

Each contributor is requested to send to the Editor two copies of his/her article and a disk copy saved preferably in Rich Text Format.

## Editorial

### Good News for the Poor of Africa and the World

Africa is bad news in all imaginable forms! It is so bad that a descendant of African slaves in America thanked God for the singular favour God bestowed on his parents and on himself by having counted his parents worthy to be slaves in America. One recalls with shame and confusion the barbaric massacres in Rwanda and the ongoing war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo deeply connected with the crisis in the Great Lakes region. One sheds tears at the havoc and mayhem unleashed against citizens of Sierra Leone, especially the children, some not more than 3-year old, who have to live the rest of their lives as amputees, victims of quarrels they may never understand. One loses hope in view of boy-soldiers trained and drugged to kill and destroy without having an opportunity in their life to learn to embark on alternative and other life-generating tasks. The barons of corruption inside and outside Africa, the barons of the diamond trade inside and outside Africa, the barons of the arms trade inside and outside Africa, regale themselves at the profit they make from sheer blood money. Men, women and children are uprooted from their homes – some lost forever in the equatorial forests, others perish through hunger and/or disease. The spectre of refugees and internally displaced persons haunt the continent into the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium. African governments and the international community appear helpless.

Nevertheless we propose this millennium edition of the *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* as an edition of hope because the Good News of Jesus Christ is brought to the Poor – especially the poorest of the poor in Africa. This good news must be proclaimed, “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” [Lk 7:22]. The new millennium is good news insofar as the poor of Africa and the world become healed to rediscover their agency and proceed to change their life by drawing from the wells of their God-given treasures instead of perpetuating the poverty and distress that have become their lot. Rediscovering their agency no matter how

amputated or disabled throws a challenge to the poor (materially poor) and those who opt for evangelical poverty to reinvent or reincarnate joy into the hopeless situations of Africa and the world; for there is hardly any creativity without internal peace and joy. Consequently, the choice to live in solidarity with the poor transforms into a creative way of joy and provides the necessary psychological distance from the mental stress caused by oppression. The poor and oppressed are given the last word by God's Spirit instead of the fabricators of the industry of poverty. The power of the poor does not lie simply in being potential forces to be mobilised to fight for their rights, but rather in realising that they are privileged centres for the manifestation of God's Spirit. "In seeking to promote human dignity, the Church shows preferential love for the poor and the voiceless, because the Lord has identified himself with them in a special way (cf. Mt. 25:40)" [Ecclesia in Asia, no. 34]. Solidarity with the poor and the marginalized is the best antidote to poverty because it is joining in the struggle of God against poverty and oppression and living in the joy of the Spirit of God.

Essays in this edition focus on various aspects of poverty, deprivation, and oppression that we live especially in Africa. They indicate also the way forward or provide answers to this thorny issue. Nnamani gives us a wide definition of the variations of experience, meaning and theology of poverty in Africa and in the Bible. Omenka focuses on the disabled persons of Nigeria and their inalienable rights. Massey presents the point of view of the Dalit, mistakenly called untouchables, in India, and discusses issues of Dalit theology of liberation. And Onaiyekan draws the attention of Moslems and Christians to the Sharia and on how to eliminate intolerance in Nigeria to put an end to violence and oppression. The concluding theological methodological paper by Maluleke focuses on the agency of Africans and the emerging paradigms of African theology in the post-cold war and post-apartheid South Africa. Finally Ekechukwu, in the section on Features, draws a lesson or two from the seminal novel *Things Fall Apart* of Chinua Achebe who will be seventy year old this year.

Elochukwu Eugene Uzukwu, c.s.sp.

## The Dialectics of Poverty and Oppression – From an African and Theological Perspective

By

Amuluche Greg. Nnamani

### **Preliminary Remarks**

The ugly effects of poverty, like hunger, sickness, underdevelopment and low self-esteem confront us daily. We encounter beggars on our streets and in the market places whose menace is as disturbing as the tragedy of their situation. We hear tales of refugees drifting from camp to camp in war-ravaged areas searching for food and security. We shudder at the fate of the slum-dwellers in the developed and developing world, who are caught in the vicious circle of crime and poverty, acting out their aggression violently within and outside their ghettos. We feel the pain of numerous people, who are terminally and chronically ill, and the grief of the elderly, whose life has become such a burden that they are bored waiting for death. All over the Third World, we come across voiceless people – minorities, widows and orphans – who are deprived of their rights; their case is always a tale of endless harassment and humiliation. All these people ordinarily qualify as the poor; and their fate is vivid in the minds of the people whose consciences are still alive.

Yet the term poverty, as it is used in different circumstances, entail more than the class of people mentioned above. Its usage in spirituality and psychology reveal yet other dimensions not often remembered. It embodies features that seem contradictory, which, nevertheless relate to one another dialectically. The ambiguity of the term poverty is such that one may find it difficult to say who is poorer; the one who lacks possessions or the one who is enslaved by his own possessions, the one who is morally depraved and for that reason psychologically wretched or the one who, though a victim of oppression, has developed such a personality that defies all odds. Poverty is such an ambiguous word, that at one time it

describes a lack, at other an ideal disposition for confronting the world. It is a paradoxical term, which could be variedly used in describing the situations of both the oppressor and the oppressed.

In what follows, we shall try to trace the history of this experience, explain its dialectics and identify its causes, expose the success and failures of the various attempts to confront it, indicate its challenge for theology and chart a way out of the vicious circle of poverty. It consists of two sections: the ambiguity and history of poverty, and the relevance and inadequacies of poverty alleviation.

### ***Section A: The Ambiguity and History of Poverty***

#### **1: Definitions of Poverty**

*Poverty* is an ambiguous term used to describe an equally paradoxical state of life. Its usage without qualification may mislead. We must therefore sample the meaning of this word in few languages, to enable us appreciate its scope. The Greeks identify three types of poverty: a) *penia* which means the state of one who is not wealthy, who serves his own needs with his own hands and has nothing superfluous; b) *ptôchei*, this qualifies the state of somebody who has nothing at all, a state of complete destitution or abject poverty.<sup>1</sup>; and c) *tapeinos* used for the description of somebody humble, lowly; poor, of humble circumstances; down-cast, down-hearted (2 Cor. 7:6), lacking confidence, meek and mild (2 Cor. 10:1).

In Hebrew the words for the poor are many. The most general word used is *raš*. Its meaning is expressed with a group of other words: *dal* characterises somebody thin and hungry-looking (2 Kg 25:12; Jer. 40:7); *ebion* is the poor as beggar (Ex. 23:6,11); '*ani* generally used to describe somebody whose ability, power and worth is waning; somebody who lives under the burden of sickness and economic deprivations; '*anaw* is yet another word used like '*ani* except that it signifies something more. It entails the religious aspect and describes somebody who is humble before God.<sup>2</sup> In general, however, the Hebrew understanding of poverty changed with time, and the use of the words got to be differentiated later.



*Ebion* and *'ani*, for instance, were at first used for describing somebody who is poor in the sense of lacking possessions. Later the two words came to imply somebody who has neither influence nor power, neither help nor prestige for the simple reason that he is poor. Much later still, they came to signify somebody who is downtrodden and oppressed because he has no influence. And finally, it became the term for the description of a man, who, because he has no earthly resources, puts his whole trust in God. Today, *'ani* or *ebion*, like *'anaw* could be used for the description of somebody humble and helpless, who puts his whole trust in God.<sup>3</sup>

Various words were also used in Latin to qualify the poor in the ancient Roman world. While *pauper* implied somebody who has little possessions, *egens* meant somebody who cannot feed himself/herself by means of his/her own income. There is yet another word, *inos*, which was mostly used by writers of fiction. It signifies one, who, in addition to not being able to feed and maintain oneself, suffers other needs and is weak, helpless and ignorant of how to attend to one's needs. But in the Middle Ages, the word *pauper* came to qualify, not only the opposite of "dives" (the rich) but also "potens" (the mighty); so, now, it describes the situation of somebody lacking possessions and freedom, somebody dependent on the mighty, and who is needy of protection and security. In cultural domain illiterates (minus doctus) and stupid people (minus cautus) were also called *pauper*. In line with this, Bernard Clairvaux and Peter Blois included the widows, orphans and pilgrims among the *pauper*.

In several African languages, the etymology of the words for poverty, reveal specific African elements, which must be noted for the full comprehension of the meaning of the phenomenon of poverty. In Chewa language of modern Malawi, for instance, the word for the poor is *umphawi*, meaning lack of kin and friends<sup>4</sup>. In Yoruba, the word for the poor is *aku-ise* which means, literally, "carrying misery". For the Ashanti of Ghana the word for the poor is *ohia*, meaning the needy. Similarly, amongst the Igbo of Nigeria, the word for the poor, *ogbenye* also denote the needy. *Ogbenye* is made up of two words: the noun *ogbe* (community or neighbours)

and the verb *nye* (the imperative of “to give”)<sup>5</sup> Alone in this word, the condition of the needy and the obligation of the others towards him is expressed. No matter how one wishes to understand the word *ogbenye*, descriptively or imperatively, it refers to a person who lives from the almsgiving of the community.

Each of these etymological definitions of the word poverty furnishes us with at least one important aspect of this reality. But only the Hebrew definition recognizes poverty as a multivariate phenomenon which entails deprivations of all sorts: lack of material possessions, nutritional requirements, health, education, selfhood and personhood. According to this view, the various wants are interconnected. He who lacks income would soon begin to lack influence and prestige, and he is liable to be humiliated and oppressed. The Jewish notion goes even further to include the spirituality of a person who puts his whole trust in God. For our purpose, we shall understand poverty in this broad sense, though not without classifications.

## **2. Classifications and Causes of Poverty**

There are at least five various types of poverty: the material, existential, anthropological, relational and spiritual poverty.

a) *Material poverty* connotes a situation of deficiency, a lack or an inadequate possession of material goods and basic infrastructures for life: food, water, shelter, minimal tools and property for a decent life to evade disease and unnecessary hardship. It is ridiculous and scandalous that people should be destitute in a world like ours that displays enormous reserve of human potentials and material resources. Evidently, the poor themselves are in most cases not responsible for their condition; and God, who provides this world of plenty, cannot be blamed for the scarcity of goods. Who is then culpable for material poverty? A statement attributed to Mahatma Ghandi gives us the clue: “*The world has enough for every body’s need, but not for everybody’s greed*”. True indeed, the world would have enough food and other goods to cater for its population, if only there were a fair distribution of goods. Selfishness and greed however would not

allow that happen. If there were less scramble for and hoarding of goods in this world, there would be no scarcity at all. What we lack is the political will to effect equity and justice in favour of the disadvantaged people. Human greed and indifference, injustice and oppression should be held responsible for the existence of material poverty. Of course, one may observe poverty caused by physical inability of the individual or scarcity of goods occasioned by crisis and atmospheric catastrophe; but in general, the remote cause and the reason for its persistence could be traced back invariably to human greed and indifference.

b) *Existential poverty* refers to an impoverished life-style of a morally depraved person, who whiles away his life in a banal existence, devoid of orientation and a sense of purpose. Although this can happen to a materially poor person, who is corrupt and inclined towards crime, it usual befalls the rich, especially the oppressively rich, who gets so entangled in material concern and acquisition that he ignores spiritual and moral values. It can take the form of self-enslavement to wealth, fame, prestige and vainglory. The existentially poor gets so used to materialism and consumerism that he becomes a victim of mammon and a prey to compulsive acquisitive life-style that leaves him perpetually unfulfilled. For such persons, unrestricted acquisition becomes a goal in itself. Nobody other than self counts. This leads them naturally to brutalise and oppress other people. Often they are tormented by their moral depravity and haunted by a sense of guilt that easily turns into a compulsive self-oppression and self-enslavement; an existentially poor person could unwittingly embark on self-annihilation.

This is the most ironical type of poverty: it comes as a boomerang to those who cause others pain and suffering through injustice and oppression. It may sediment as a psychological problem in form of depression, frustration, and sadness arising from a sense of extreme guilt. By implication, an existentially poor person may be culpable for his poverty after all, but he can be nonetheless helpless and handicapped in his situation. If only such persons could discover God's purpose for creation, and God's intention for making us human in his image and likeness

(Gen.1:26), they would come to know true freedom (Ex. 16:6-8), acquire the happiness of the fullness of life (Jn. 10:10) and spare the ecology for the future generation.

*c) Anthropological poverty* is the term used to qualify the interior loss of selfhood, that arises from oppression, disregard, humiliation and the violation of one's own integrity as a person. It is that forceful alienation from the root of one's history and culture that lives one hanging in the no-man's-land of cultural concoction and alienation. It describes the experience of humiliated people, and is often used to characterize "the exploitation and slavery to which the black peoples were subjected, and of the way in which they themselves have interiorised the patterns, values, and models of the slave-owning powers".<sup>6</sup> The late Cameroonian theologian, Engelbert Mveng, was the first person to call people's attention to this form of poverty; and he meant that Africa needed to be liberated from it before the continent can move forward. Imperialism, colonialism and slavery are known to have caused this type of poverty in Africa. They certainly robbed Africans a part of their custom and cultural heritage, and violated their human integrity. Class-consciousness, racism and sexism are also causes of this type of poverty. Behind all these, however, lies the human desire to dominate and exploit others. The desire for domination feeds the ingenious injustice of the mighty against the weak and sustains the patriarchy in its various forms.

The tragedy of this experience is that the victim loses self-esteem and self-identity, and internalises self-doubt and inferiority complex. Values that make for identity get lost. And since it is mostly a type of colonisation of the mind, the victims interiorise the prejudice of their oppressors and mete the same treatment to themselves, thereby displaying the obnoxious nature of the vicious circle of poverty: dependency trait which persists as long as the master wants it. The victim is poor and needs help from the oppressor, and when he is poor he gets dependent on him, and remain perpetually on the receiving end.

The result is an imbalanced power affiliation that inevitably subjugates and dominates the weak partner. From this point of view, a good number of thinkers in the Third World now look at

the current process of globalisation with suspicion, because such a system propounded in the interest of the West, in a context of domination devoid of equal chances, is bound to establish itself as a relentless process of neo-colonialism, that is programmed to perpetuate anthropological poverty.

The Third World nations struggle to eliminate poverty; but they are condemned to do that from a disadvantaged position of dependency and indebtedness to the West. Some nations in Africa, for instance, are already collapsing under the weight of their debt burdens; and as relief from the creditors are not forthcoming, they are apparently losing hope of ever being able to stand up by themselves to chart the path to sustainable development. In the face of the ongoing globalisation and the excruciating indebtedness of the Third World to the West the campaign against poverty seems lost. Even the help that comes from powerful nations through the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organizations are now suspect; they look like baits designed to perpetrate the oppression of the weak nations. The vicious circle of dependency is perfectly in place, and the poor has truly become the wretched of the earth and irresistibly locked within the oppressive mechanisms of the oppressive rich.

As is typical of vicious circles, some ill-advised measures employed by the victims to liberate themselves often turn out to be self-oppressive. Even when the oppressors are far from the scene, the oppression continues because the oppressed has himself inadvertently internalised the art of the oppressors and has taken to self-oppression. When the colonizers departed their pupils in palaces of power perfected corruption and enthroned self-oppression. How else can one explain the mercenary attitude of most present day African rulers who impoverish their countries siphoning money from their national treasuries to patronise foreign banks?

The people of the Third World must resolve to resist the manipulations of the Western oppressors as well as the intrigues of the greedy and corrupt regimes at home ward off marginalization and unrestrained exploitation. Let us make no mistakes about it,

oppressors live in the illusion that they must have people to oppress; they thus abhor the equality of all peoples.<sup>7</sup>

d) Another type of poverty, that is yet to be recognised by many, is what I may call *relational poverty*: this is typified by the lack of kin and friends that is very much abhorred in Africa. He who has no relations, friends or groups to belong to is poor by African standard. This is true irrespective of the person's material wealth. Essentially, what makes for the quality of life of a human being is genuine relationship. One needs only to look at the claims of the dialogical positivists to recognise that human beings are essentially constituted in relationship. They insist that "being" must be recognised as "being-in-relation" and that genuine human relationship has ontological significance.<sup>8</sup> This relational notion of being prepares the ground for the proper understanding of the poverty of being and poverty of personhood.<sup>9</sup>

Relational poverty can be easily identified in the African context because of the African relational notion of personhood. Unlike in the Western philosophy, where a human being is evaluated in terms of his rationality, autonomy and individualism, the African thought confirms the ontology of a person in terms of his blood relationship and belongingness to a society. It is as John Pobee, a Ghanaian theologian, argued in 1979 "that while Descartes philosophised *Cogito ergo sum*, the Akan society would rather argue *Cognatus ergo sum* – i.e. I belong by blood relationship, therefore I am."<sup>10</sup> Arguing also in favour of a relational notion of person in Africa, E. E. Uzukwu has this to say: "Western philosophy recognizes the fundamental need of relationship for the realisation of person. However, the "I" is constituted before it chooses to be related. But the African tendency is to insist on relationship as essential to the constitution of the "I". It will be difficult to understand an individual without the essential linkages to divinities, family, kindred and ethnic group."<sup>11</sup> Two statements in Igbo language buttress this point: *Mmadu ka ego* (to have somebody is more valuable than to have money) and *Ikwa ka uba* (relations value more than wealth). The relationship that is at stake here should exist not only horizontally amongst the living, but also vertically between the living and the living dead, between the



living and the unborn. In the Christian sense, it would entail the relationship between God and human beings.

Consequently, relational poverty has both present, future and past dimensions. It is there when one lacks membership to revered socio-cultural organizations and belongingness to a family. Among the Igbo of Nigeria for instance, to be a bastard is to be poor. This is a poverty of heritage, due to lack of visible belongingness. And to buttress one's dignity and personhood, an Igbo usually refers to his parentage and family. In the genuine traditional setting, enquiry about a person, either for marriage or career, does not begin with "who are you" but with "whose child are you?", to whom do you belong. Childless people are relationally poor, for setting a full stop to their generation. Theirs can be voluntary as is the case with celibates, or fateful as with sterile couples. But for not having children to continue their lineage they are relationally poor even when they are materially well off. Relational poverty also describes the poverty of the widows and orphans. The basic problem of widows and orphans is that the level of relationship drops abruptly with the loss of their most intimate ones, partner and parents respectively. By implication, any state of life that discourages interpersonal relationship, be it psychological or existential, promotes relational poverty.

In terms of duration, all the above classified forms of poverty could be either structural or conjunctural.<sup>12</sup> *Structural poverty* is a long-term or relatively permanent lack of basic structures and abilities for the acquisition of necessities of life. This type of poverty takes more involvement and time to alleviate. *Conjunctural poverty* on the other hand, is a temporal loss of possessions mostly by reason of climatic catastrophe, wars, fire disaster, and consequent crisis. Unlike the structurally poor, the conjuncturally poor can easily regain his balance when the crisis is over. Almsgiving can alleviate or even eradicate this type of poverty.

We need to note this general classification, because whether one should embark on eradication or alleviation of poverty depends on whether the lack is structural or conjunctural, i.e. of lasting or short-term duration. If the lack is deep and of long-term duration a

short-term solution like relief or almsgiving cannot bring much improvement. Structural poverty, like ignorance arising from some cultural inhibitions and technical backwardness, must be confronted radically; sporadic almsgiving is not enough; the victims must have to be taught the technical know-how to produce the goods themselves. Fast remedies devoid of the will to get to the roots of the problem may turn out to be counterproductive. Only when the root causes of poverty are identified and eliminated can we save the structurally poor from slipping into a permanent state of destitution, indigence and wretchedness.

e) *Spiritual poverty* is another major type of poverty, though with a striking difference. It contrasts with all the above types of poverty and relates to them dialectically as a therapy. It is a voluntary self-renunciation, self-sacrifice and detachment from material goods undertaken for the purpose of achieving the goal of life. Unlike all the other forms of poverty that are forced, spiritual poverty is voluntary and not imposed by any life situation. It is a positive disposition to life; and as such, it does not connote deficiency or privation. Rather, it generates genuine freedom and self-fulfilment, makes genuine love possible and promotes humility, and confirms faith and dependence on God.

In summary, poverty is a term that could denote both negative and positive experiences. On the one hand it is an undesirable condition of life. On the other, it describes a chosen life of restraint, adopted to contain the impulses that otherwise proliferate forced poverty. Poverty is therefore a paradoxical term that describes the dialectic of life. However, poverty, as it concerns us here, refers mainly to the state of the victims of deprivations of all sorts, who are materially and economically, culturally and morally, socially and politically handicapped.

### **3. Poverty in the pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa**

Africa is familiar with poverty to an extent that the name of the continent has become synonymous with it. The tragedy is that poverty seems to be increasing rather than decreasing in the sub-Saharan Africa. Decline in living standards of remote villages and

urban shantytowns characterise the Africa of today. A research carried out by John Iliffe shows that the situation of poverty is worsening in the continent. There is the belief that “until recently there were no poor in Africa, because economic differentiation was slight, resources were freely available, and the ‘extended family’ supported members. Only with the coming of colonial rule, market economies, and urbanisation ... did things begin to fall apart.”<sup>13</sup>

This does not mean that poverty did not exist in the pre-colonial Africa. It did exist, but it was rare. Its occurrence differed from place to place and from time to time. All depended on the availability of land and access to labour. In the land-rich societies only the incapacitated – the old, the handicapped, and the very young – were poor, while in the land-scarce areas even able-bodied people could be poor. Able-bodied people rarely became structurally poor in the pre-colonial era.<sup>14</sup> In some cultures of the sub-Saharan Africa, the incapacitated were not allowed to become poor, except of course they lacked relations.

With population growth, urbanisation, intensive agriculture and other vestiges of colonisation like Apartheid, poverty began to appear among the able-bodied people in modern Africa. Now that ill-advised development projects and unplanned educational systems characterise the corrupt regimes of the continent, the rate of unemployment and low wages rises in geometrical proportion. And faced with the alarming effect of ecological disaster and political upheaval, the post-colonial Africa experiences more conjunctural poverty now than in the pre-colonial era: drought and wars turn out economic and political refugees in their thousands across Africa.

In a country like Nigeria more and more people are living below poverty line. The Federal Office of Statistics (FOS 1996) warns that 71 percent of Nigeria’s household are poor. And according to the World Bank report of 1996 “about 34.7 million people in Nigeria out of an estimated 1992 population figure of 102 million are poor.” The report went on to show that cases of extreme poverty increased nationally from 10 million to 14 million between 1992 and 1996.<sup>15</sup> The following view from an economist on **Nigerian economy says it all:**

...the Nigerian economy has witnessed such inherent characteristics as declining capacity utilization in real sector, poor performance of major infrastructural facilities, large budget deficits, rising level of unemployment and underemployment and high inflationary rate. In addition, the economy has lingering problems of import dependence, reliance on a single economic sector i.e. crude oil, weak industrial base, low level of agricultural production, a weak private sector and high external debt overhang, inefficient and in most cases lack of public utilities, low quality of social services, widening inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income.”<sup>16</sup>

This is happening to a country that is endowed with a huge reserve of crude oil, vast arable land and enormous human resources. It is a tragedy which challenges every right-thinking person, not only to bemoan the unjust system that produces this wretched condition, but also to do something concrete to end the scandal of poverty in a world of plenty human and material resources.

Earlier in this paper, we had identified colonialism as the remote cause of poverty in modern Africa. Its oppressive and exploitative character left behind a culture of self-perpetrating misbehaviour, which could be termed the immediate cause of poverty. High on the list is corruption. Corruption begets inefficiency, injustice and violation of human rights, misplaced priorities and self-sabotage, as well as lack of direction and erosion of values in education, politics and cultures. Inefficiency abounds in every aspect of life. Because people are hurriedly in pursuit of the “almighty” money, they would not bring out time and energy to execute a function, to learn a skill: fake medicine, drinks and produce abound. When nothing is genuine poverty thrives. This inefficiency shows itself fundamentally in education, which is now undergoing a crisis of irrelevance. Many students are today more interested in the collection of certificates, which they call “meal tickets”, than in the

acquisition of skills and learning. To them, what matters is the acquisition of certificates, whether it certifies knowledge or ignorance is irrelevant. After all people get employment not according to their qualification and knowledge, but according to their relationship to the decision-makers. Wrong people fill up important spaces in the Government and economy, because nepotism and not knowledge, money and not capabilities are the yardsticks for selection of workers. Injustice and deprivation of rights abound. People earn money without working for it, and those who work have their salaries either slashed or withheld. Because of corruption, experienced and disciplined statesmen are not allowed to enter the corridors of power; in their stead are selfish, ill-equipped mediocrities, whose visionless leadership turn oppressive. Because of corruption, dubious people chase out rightful heirs from their throne and crown themselves kings. Because of corruption, title taking, which used to be the prerogative of men of proven integrity, has now been hijacked by the oppressive rich, who can display wealth. Oppression thrives. All these mal-developments are sources of oppression as well as structural poverty.

Another immediate cause of poverty in a country like Nigeria is acquisitive lifestyle. Like most countries suffering from anthropological poverty, Nigeria assumes the illusions of capitalist societies: to think that the pursuit of individual egoism can lead to the well-being of everybody. Consumerism and limitless acquisition of things have become priorities. The having mode of existence, as identified by an American psychoanalyst, Eric Fromm, dominates in the Nigerian mentality. According to Fromm there are two attitudes to life that influence human existence – “having mode” and “being mode”. For people whose mode of existence is predominantly that of having, consumerism and limitless acquisition of things become priorities; while for those who live in the “being mode” values and relational use of creativity and talents are optimised.<sup>17</sup> Most Nigerians live in the having mode; this is responsible for the looting mentality that pervades the whole of the Nigerian society.

Corruption is therefore the overriding single cause of poverty in modern Africa. Thriving as a vestige of colonialism, corruption is a form of self-oppression.

#### **4. Poverty and oppression in the Bible**

From the foregoing definitions and classification, the truth emerges that poverty is a statement about the oppressed and the oppressor. In all cases its remote causes are oppression and injustice, which, in turn, are ignited by human greed and insatiability. The bible shares the same view. In the book of Deuteronomy, the people of God are told *"you should have no poor in your midst for Yahweh will give you prosperity in the land that you have conquered. If you listen to the voice of Yahweh, your God, and obey all that he has commanded you...he will bless you as he promised"* (Deut. 15:4f). By implication, poverty comes about when the people, especially the rich and the mighty, fail to observe the precepts of God; and also when people are lazy and wasteful (Prov. 6:10f; 10:4). Although God can also inflict poverty on people to test them and to move them towards conversion (Ps. 66:4; 119:67,71), he does not in any way programme poverty for his people. He who created human persons in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26; 2:15) and led his people out of Egypt, away from exploitation, cannot be in support of poverty. In most cases, involuntary poverty is caused by oppression and injustice. Biblically speaking therefore, the materially poor are the oppressed, the abused and the marginalized. The prophets denounce the injustice of their oppressors and preach social justice (Job 24:2-12; Amos 2:6-7).

The New Testament, especially Luke's gospel, shows that God favours the poor. The proclamation of the birth of Jesus was first communicated to the poor shepherds (Lk. 2:8-18). And in the very beginning of his public appearance in a synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus insinuated, in what looks like his manifesto, that he has been *"anointed to bring good news to the poor...and to free the oppressed"* (Lk. 4:18). And true indeed he had close association with the poor, the blind and the lame, and called them even to his banquet (Lk. 14:21-24). In contrast, he condemned the rich for not



sharing with the poor (Lk. 16:19-31) and exposed the foolishness of their calculations (Lk. 12:13-21). The Magnificat, which summarises the Old Testament prophecy and theology of poverty, and opens it towards the New Testament perspective, speaks of how God raises the lowly – *tapeinoi* (Lk. 1:52) and looks at the lowliness of his handmaid (Lk. 1:48).

However, when Jesus is made to declare in Luke's version of the beatitudes, that "blessed are the poor" (Lk. 6:20), he leaves one to wonder whether poverty is still a curse to be eradicated or a blessing to be envied. Evidently, the poor referred to in this context are the *ptōchoi*, they are people who have nothing at all, whose picture is vividly painted in the story of the Dives and Lazarus as the ragged, starved, incapacitated (by sickness), deprived of dignity and security, and victims of misfortune, human greed and arrogance (Lk. 16: 19-31). How can such persons be blessed? Even though Matthew's version of the beatitudes tends to bring in more light by saying "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mat. 5:3), it does not very much unravel the paradox; for he still uses the word *ptōchoi* referring to people materially destitute. It is believed, however, that Luke presented the beatitudes as was delivered by Jesus, while Matthew edited it for his Jewish audience, who would have been scandalized that Jesus calls blessed those who became poor because of a breach of divine covenant. Experts have varied opinions here. Be that as it may, one must, however, hold firm to the point that the poor whose blessedness are proclaimed are indeed those who are materially, economically and socially poor.

The poor are blessed, not because poverty ceases to be negative, but because of the opportunity it offers for one to grow spiritually towards perfect trust in God. The poor should naturally find it easier to open him/herself to God. In recognition of this fact, Jesus points out that it is difficult, and would need the special grace of God, for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:23-26). The rich lives with the danger of diverting allegiance due to God to mammon (Matt. 6:24), of basking in false security (Lk. 12:16-21), and of becoming blind to the needs of his neighbours (Lk. 16:19-31) for the sake of wealth. It is against this background that Jesus speaks of the blessedness of the poor. Moreover, the poor are also

blessed for the simple reason that the Messiah has come to liberate them from poverty: he will give bread to the hungry, heal the sick, and open the eyes of the blind. The arrival of the kingdom of God is their blessing, because it is a kingdom based on justice and peace. This beatitude does not in any way suggest that poverty is to be glorified; neither does it spiritualise it to the point of explaining away its gravity. It merely speaks of the opportunity poverty could offer for growth and about the concrete relief the event of Jesus Christ brings.

But by making the words of Jesus to read "Blessed are the poor in spirit, Matthew was pointing precisely at that dynamism characteristic of the Hebrew notion of poverty, which begins with material poverty, goes beyond the experience of humiliation and total loss of trust in human beings, to a state of putting one's whole trust in God. It is a type of dialectic that must happen in order for the poor to be really blessed. As William Barclay says:

If a man has realised his own utter helplessness, and put his whole Trust in God, there will enter into his life two things which are opposite sides of the same thing. He will become completely *detached from things*, for he will know that things have not got it in them to bring happiness or security; and he will become completely *attached to God*, for he will know that God alone can bring him help, and hope, and strength. The man who is poor in spirit is the man who has realized that things mean nothing, and that God means everything.

We must be careful not to think that this beatitude calls actual material poverty a good thing. Poverty is not a good thing.... That kind of poverty is the aim of the Christian gospel to remove. The poverty which is blessed is the poverty *of spirit*, when a man realises his own utter lack of resources to meet life, and finds his help and strength in God.

There is no guarantee that somebody materially poor becomes automatically poor in spirit. There are poor people who are very possessive of the little they find, so selfish that they let nothing off their hands once they clench their fist. One can remain possessive

of material things and attached to material things even when one is destitute. The poor praised are the poor who, on account of their poverty, have learnt to live detached lives. Poverty *per se* is not praised, but the life of detachment it enhances. By implication therefore there can be a rich person who is poor in the spirit of detachment, and poor person who is selfish. Although this interpretation is right, it is belaboured with danger, because as Gustavo Gutierrez says, it invariably “leads to comforting and tranquillising conclusions”.<sup>18</sup> It can make the rich live in the illusion that he can be rich in the midst of the poor. It can make him glorify poverty instead of seeking the way for the poor to come out of it. It remains questionable, however, whether a really detached person can be rich in the midst of poor people.

In Christian terms, both the rich and the poor must get detached from things and attach themselves to God. The bible urges believers to live detached lives so that they can be God-bound. And when misfortune and human exploitation imposes poverty on people the one way it can be eradicated is by a voluntary practice of spiritual poverty by all concerned. This is embodied in the Pauline account of Jesus’ own spirituality: “Although he was rich, he made himself poor to make you rich through his poverty” (2Cor. 8:9). And out of the same background, Paul describes his mission with the Christians at Corinth thus: “So we fight with the weapon of justice, to attack as well as to defend....we seem to be poor, but we enrich many; apparently we have nothing, but we possess everything.” God has chosen the poor, says James, to be rich in faith (James 2:5). The truth is that those who voluntarily embrace spiritual poverty make others rich and those who amass wealth at the expense of others impoverish many

## ***B The Relevance and Inadequacies of Poverty Alleviation***

### **1. Care of the Poor in the Church**

The early Church took the blessedness of the poor in spirit very serious and urged believers to get detached from things and attached to God. She saw in voluntary poverty (*paupertas spontanea*) a way of realising this ideal. Through voluntary poverty one was to gain freedom from the grip of mammon and the

compulsiveness of the instinct of acquisition and to be well disposed for total dependence on God. This idea primarily motivated the early Christian monasticism and even subsequent spirituality of the faithful. In the Middle Ages, the renunciation of property was common, not only among the monks, but also among priests and lay people. It became yet more popular through the preaching and lifestyle of St. Francis of Assisi, who stressed both the individual and community obligation to voluntary renunciation of material goods. He urged people, not only to renounce material possessions, but also to relinquish all that they are proud of: knowledge, piety and even their cherished feeling of being poor in spirit.

Before St. Francis, the reason for voluntary poverty was mainly the attainment of personal salvation. With him however the idea began to gain ground, that voluntary poverty could be a way of confronting poverty head on. It was to train people in humility and in the imitation of Christ, who became poor to make us rich (2Cor. 8:9), and also to point to the life of detachment as a sure way of eradicating poverty in the world.<sup>19</sup> The Church learnt from Christ that sacrifice ushers in glory. This became evident in his life which moved from self emptying and humility to exaltation (Phil. 2:6-11).

Even though the bible is suspicious of riches and St. Francis insisted on total renunciation of property, the mainstream Christianity of the medieval period did not, however, reject riches; it believed that property and wealth should be shared, not renounced. This conviction produced a type of tension that characterised the attitude of the medieval Church towards riches. On the one hand, she adopted the biblical criticism of wealth; and on the other she expected support from the wealthy. To observers, it looked as if a symbiotic relationship between the rich and the poor were wished in the Middle Ages: "The rich supply the needs of the poor, who in turn provide the rich with the opportunity for good works and prayers for their salvation."<sup>20</sup>

One evident thing about this period is that humility and almsgiving became very important virtues. Since then, the Church gives much attention to the care of the poor, both at community

and individual levels. Christianity takes the credit that today many individuals and organisations in the West took to attending to the poor regularly and particularly in times of crisis. But, little by little, the tendency to institutionalise charity began to increase in the history of the Church. More charitable organisations have begun to emerge to take over a good part of the apostolate of the Church. The side effect of this development is that the Church at a time was emphasising charity and almsgiving more than justice; in the end she often “ignored the root causes of poverty”,<sup>21</sup>. Individuals and organisations were habitually concentrating on measures that make for the alleviation and not the eradication of poverty. Processes and structures that entrench poverty were hardly ever challenged.

The problem with this early Christian care of the poor, which still lingers today, is that it paid more attention to providing alms to the poor, and less to embarking on measures that would eradicate poverty from the roots. At the root of structural poverty is oppression and injustice. Almsgiving that does not equally address the issue of injustice and oppression maintains the status quo. Think of the enormous charity work provided by such organisations as *Church In Need*, *Misereor*, *Caritas* etc. Much is achieved in terms of relief. It would be unfortunate, if relief alone were offered to the needy, but no escape route from poverty. In the Third World, the consciousness has now grown that certain aids from Western organisations come with strings attached, and may achieve little or nothing more than servicing the Third World dependency on the West. If dependency is not disengaged poverty is bound to persist in all subtlety.

The situation is perhaps changing; the impact of the social teaching of the Church and liberation theologies are being felt today. Both emphasise the interconnection between development, justice and peace.

In fact, a look at the evolution of the Catholic social teaching<sup>22</sup> shows how the recent popes have been shifting ground from the minimal and superficial care of the poor typical of the medieval period to a more radical and self-involving care of the poor. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII made the first move with his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (The Modern Situation) which argues in favour of the

worker over economic advancements. Forty years later, in 1931, Pope Pius XI wrote the *Quadragesimo Anno* (The Fortieth Year) to commemorate the *Rerum Novarum*: in it he declares for social justice and challenges capitalism and unjust regimes in Governments. In 1961 Pope John XXIII wrote *Mater et Magistra* (Mother and Teacher) condemning the attempt by the wealthy to misuse the social teaching to resist social change; and criticising the church's over-emphasis on the right to property, he offered many "options for the poor". Three years later, in 1963, the same John XXIII wrote *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), the first Encyclical addressed to the whole world, to urge for peace and respect of human rights. Most importantly, he campaigned for the right of the poor to share in the resources of the earth and reminded the rich of their obligation to do more than just giving alms. Pope John XXIII went further in his 1965 Encyclical - *Dignitatis humanae* (Dignity of the human person) – to identify recognition of "the dignity of the human person" as a way out of the numerous evidence of human misery. Moving in the same direction, Pope Paul VI tackled the issue of the world's mass poverty in his 1967 *Populorum Progressio*. In that Encyclical he recommends a new global economic structure that would adequately take care of the interest of the poor. A year after, in 1968, the bishops of Latin America met in Medellin and declared option for the poor calling for solidarity with the poor and the marginalized. Again, while addressing the 1971 Synod on *De justitia in mundo* (Justice in the world), Pope Paul VI spoke against structural injustice and systems that marginalize the poor. And in his 1975 *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Evangelisation in the Modern world) the pope pressed for a change in thought and economics to favour the poor.

On his part, Pope John Paul II gave out the following encyclicals to advocate social justice, integrity of creation and universal harmony: *Redemptor Hominis* (Redeemer of Humanity) 1979; *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Labour) 1981; *Familiaris consortio* (Letter on the Family) 1981; *Solicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern) 1987; *Centesimus Annus* (100 years of *Rerum Novarum*) 1991, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospels of Life) 1995. In 1994, the African synod of bishops tackled the issue of social



injustice. From a perspective that sees the Church as the family of God, the synod argued for the restoration of the African values of communion, fraternity, solidarity and peace. It condemned the external debt burden, IMF/World Bank policies and the Western sale of arms to the African nations which impoverishes and aggravates conflicts in Africa. And requested the Western nations to cancel some percentages of the debt, and advised creditors to desist from granting loans to corrupt regimes in Africa, because such credit merely advance the interest of the rich at the expense of the poor. A campaign for justice and peace is therefore a campaign against poverty. Efforts in this direction lead to poverty eradication.

## **2. Care of the Poor in ancient and modern Africa**

The effort to alleviate or eradicate poverty differed from place to place in Africa of the pre-colonial and post-colonial period. Generally, areas with Christian and Islamic influence try to contain poverty by means of the institutional care of the poor. In other places without Islamic and Christian influence, informal benevolence flourished. This suggests that the world religions brought new dimensions into the usual African approach to poverty.

The institutional care of the poor, introduced by the world religions, has the tendency to train recipients to be perpetually dependent on the donors, thereby encouraging poverty. This is very much the case in many Islamic communities, where an Alhaji might be very ready to display philanthropy by cooking for hundreds of poor people in a day, but would be very reluctant to do something to let his dependents become independent. He might feel fulfilled performing a charitable work afterwards, but he has failed in his duty, if he does not try to provide education and job for them. Apart from encouraging many able-bodied people to be dependent, such mode of almsgiving remains superficial and incapable of attaining lasting eradication of poverty. At the end it would not even be able to alleviate poverty, because the number of the poor will continue to rise.

The traditional African care of the poor contrasts with the above. It is family oriented and aims more at rehabilitation of the poor than at mere almsgiving; for, on the one hand, it believes that the poor merits sympathy and should be spared undue exposure,<sup>23</sup> and that it is better to teach the able-bodied poor how to earn a living than to subject him to perpetual reception of alms. The traditional African society did not envisage perpetual destitution, because relations were expected to help the poor sooner or later. Where poverty persisted, therefore, it showed people's reluctance to help the poor. To many Africans, structural poverty is disgraceful: for, if it is caused by laziness, the victim should be culpable; and if by the unwillingness of the relations to help, the latter should be ashamed. This is particularly true of the Igbo of Nigeria, who see abject poverty as a sign, either that one has misused one's opportunity (this includes displeasing the gods) or that one has nobody to turn to.

The African tradition recognises that poverty is a relational issue, primarily seeking the concern of kin and friends, who should help with the intention that they are performing an existential duty and not a mere act of charity. In an ideal Igbo society, not even the poorest of the poor – the childless elderly – should become destitute. If he or she has no children to depend on, the extended family should be relied on. The poor was not expected to go begging, because to do that would amount to insulting the kin, making them look irresponsible or selfish.

The traditional Igbo society was thus prone to concealing poverty for this very reason. The concealment of poverty and the obvious absence of professional begging in the Igbo villages puzzled the early missionaries, especially as compared to their experience in Yoruba cities. To these missionaries, the Yoruba people appeared more urbanised, wealthier, and culturally more sophisticated than the stateless Igbo people. But much to their surprise, poverty and professional begging were more pronounced among the Yoruba communities than among the Igbo societies. Disorganised and wretched as the Igbo people seemed they featured no beggars, even though they had their own share of the poor.<sup>24</sup> The poor were **concealed not out of pride, but out of the belief that the issue of**

poverty primarily concerns the victim and his relations. This belief discouraged professional begging and persuaded able-bodied poor to seek worthwhile means of livelihood.

The ancient Igbo also had other ways of escape from poverty, which are no longer so feasible. The first is migration. Young people from densely populated areas of Igboland learnt very early to migrate in order to evade the problems of structural poverty accruing from land scarcity. In modern time, however, migration encounters problems: it is now checked within the country by ethnicity and outside by racism. Another escape route was polygamy. Widows usually lose their land to the husband's relations, if they had no male issue. This cultural regulation about land rights would invariably plunge such widows into destitution. But they were often integrated within polygamous family structures. Today, polygamy is fading away, but the land rights have not been improved upon to favour widows without male issues. In their case, destitution seems programmed. Improvement in the land and property rights of the widows may tackle poverty better than just giving them alms.

### **3. Solidarity with the poor in liberation theology**

The theme poverty is a goldmine for liberation theology. As a theology done from the perspective of the poor, poverty is at once its hermeneutical principle and the target of its orthopraxis. The Latin American liberation theologians should take the credit for being the first to raise the issue of poverty for theological reflection. Their thought reveals that poverty is purely a structural issue, and should be seen as a by-product of social and economic marginalization of people, and not the fault of the poor.

As against popular "spiritualistic" interpretation of the phrase "the poor in spirit" in Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, which leaves people with the impression that they can campaign against poverty and still retain their riches, liberation theology contends that there can be no spiritual poverty, if there is no corresponding attempt to visibly and concretely renounce poverty. The prophets and Jesus Christ are seen as models in this regard: Jesus and the

prophets did not stop at denouncing poverty, but fought against it, and in the process lived poverty.<sup>25</sup>

According to this view, material poverty must be protested against; for it is a scandalous phenomenon to be eradicated, and not merely to be alleviated. The rich must become spiritually (voluntarily) poor, not in form of an interior detachment from goods that does not entail a move to liberate the poor from oppression. Spiritual poverty means a relational involvement with the poor in their situation. It is not a passive disposition, but an active participation in the experience of the poor, a life of solidarity with them. Solidarity with the poor means becoming poor with the poor: foregoing all oppressive devices the rich have put in place to exploit them. Solidarity with the poor means confronting oppression and injustice wherever we find them not minding the cost in terms of discomfort. It means destroying the systems that perpetually keep them down. For the Church, it may mean priests not becoming richer than the people they minister to, so that they can confront oppressive regimes together with the poor.

It should be noted that liberation theology takes different forms in various continents. Points of emphasis differ from place to place, but the one common concern is liberation from poverty. In Latin America emphasis is on liberation from material poverty, from unjust economic oppression. In Africa it is on liberation from anthropological and material poverty, from cultural loss of identity and esteem, as well as from unjust socio-economic systems. That is why inculturation theology should be seen as a form of liberation theology. In Asian context liberation from existential poverty is uppermost in their minds, i.e. liberation from mammon, greed and consumerism as influenced by their Buddhist heritage. This is why the Christian insistence that voluntary poverty should be used for the fight against forced poverty is better received in Asian spirituality than elsewhere. Because of these nuances, it would be wrong to import the liberation theology of one continent into another. All the types of poverty are to be found everywhere, but certain types are more pronounced in the various areas.

These variations notwithstanding, liberation theology, be it in Latin America, Asia or Africa, shares the same view “that the poor do not need charity but justice, so that instead of waiting for crumbs to fall from the master’s table, they can take their legitimate place at the table”.<sup>26</sup>

### **C Summary and Conclusion**

Poverty is an experience of varied forms of deprivations that relate in part dialectically to one another. The material and anthropological poverty appear as by-products of relational poverty, and existential poverty as nemesis to the oppressors who perpetrate other forms of poverty. All these types of poverty are usually forced and undesirable: they are imposed either by natural or oppressive conditions of life. All these types of poverty belong to the class of forced poverty. The only consequential way to eradicate them is to embark on voluntary (spiritual) poverty. This is the dialectics of poverty. Voluntary poverty relates to other forms of poverty inversely: where voluntary poverty is rare exploitation and impoverishment of the weak proliferate, and where voluntary poverty abounds poverty is bound to retreat because justice and equity flourish. The poor is poor because some persons are rich at their expense and the rich is rich because some persons are impoverished for their sake. Thus the accumulation of possessions without distribution may cause the rich existential problems, but it invariably impoverishes a number of people. From this point of view, poverty is the by-product of oppression and exploitation.

Poverty is indeed a relational issue, which the victim alone cannot solve. People living above poverty-line are obliged to help the poor, who, despite their struggle to survive harsh conditions, either by means of industry or guile, resourcefulness or hawking, begging or stealing, cannot bail themselves out of the cocoon of poverty trap. Of course, the poor do receive help from their families and friends and from humanitarian and charitable institutions. But more often than not, the help comes to them in form of irregular almsgiving, as charity that relieves them

momentarily from want, but leaves them often still entrenched in the oppressive structures that breed poverty. Charity may be devoid of justice, if it settles superficially at the level of almsgiving and covers the issue of injustice with deceptive benevolence. If charity work should not sometimes become unwittingly guilty of maintaining and multiplying the structures of oppression, it must ultimately include the promotion of justice and peace. Any programme of poverty alleviation that does not entail a plan to confront the root causes of poverty – injustice and oppression – may be an investment in futility. The poor needs justice and not only charity. What is said about peace is true of poverty alleviation: if you want the eradication of poverty prepare for justice.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible. Commentary on the Revelation of John*, vol. 16, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Anne-Lene Fenger, "Armut. Biblisch-historisch" in: *Neues Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, vol. 1 Hrsg. Von Peter Eicher, München: Kösel 1984, s. 25-27.

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, Vol. 1, p. 91 This image of God is reflected in the following Psalms: 34:6; 9:18; 35:10; 68:10; 72:4; 104:41; 132:15

<sup>4</sup> John Iliffe, *The African Poor. A history*. Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Protus O. Kemdirm, "The Lucan and African Traditional Attitude to the Poor", in: *West African Journal of Ecclesial Studies* (WAJES), vol. 4, 1998, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> Maria C. L. Bingemer, "Third World Theologies: Conversion to Others", in: *Third World Theologies. Commonalities and Divergencies*. Edited by K. C. Abraham, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1990, p. x

<sup>7</sup> Tissa Balasuriya, "Globalization", in: *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, edited by Virginia Fabella & co.. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 94. See also, Paulinus I. Odozor, "Globalization and Mission in Africa in the Third Millenium", in: *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*, vol. 9: 1-2, 1997. and all other articles from, R. Schreiter, F. Wilfred, O. Ike & E. Ngwoke in the same volume.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on this see Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1937, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, pp 11-34. On relational ontology see A. G. Nnamani, *The Paradox of a Suffering God*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang 1995, p. 398.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Marcello Azevedo, *Vocation For Mission. The Challenge of Religious Life Today*, New York: Paulist Press 1988, pp 14 - 24.

<sup>10</sup> John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, Abingdon / Nashville: Parthenon Press 1979, p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, "Healing Memories: the Church as Agent of Reconciliation", in: *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*, Vol. 9: 1-2, 1997, p.110; see also his book: *A listening Church. Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1996, p. 42-43.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Pierre Gutton, *La société et les pauvres: l'exemple de la généralité de Lyon 1534-1789* (Paris, 1971), pp. 51-3, quoted in: John Iliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> John Iliffe, *op. cit.* p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 4-6.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. C. C. Agu, "My Formula For Poverty Alleviation in the Third Millennium", in: *Gate of Heaven*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Nov. 2000, A magazine of the Catholic Women Organization – Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province., p. 27

<sup>16</sup> C. C. Agu, *op. cit.* p. 26

<sup>17</sup> Eric Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* London: Abacus 1979, p. 75-109.

<sup>18</sup> G. Guitiérrez, *A liberation theology: History, Politics and Salvation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1973, (Spanish original, 1971), p. 290

<sup>19</sup> Documents of the Vatican II. *Perfectae Caritatis*. Decree on the up-date Renewal of Religious life, Nr. 13. and *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Nr. 17.

<sup>20</sup> "On the Christian views and practices of poverty" in: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 16, p, 349

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Evaluation Report of the Justice, Development and Peace programme*, published in December, 1998 by the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Lagos.

<sup>23</sup> Iliffe. *Op. cit.* p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 6.

<sup>25</sup> See 2 Cor. 8:9; G. Guitiérrez, *op. cit.*, p. 165 and A. G. Nnamani, *The Paradox of a Suffering God.*, p.246,

<sup>26</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Poverty", in: *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, edited by V. Fabella and R. S. Sugirtharajah, Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books 2000, p. 171.

## The Disabled and the Society: A Case Study on Nigeria<sup>1</sup>

By

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### **Abstract**

The visit of the Pope to Nigeria on the eve of the transition to democratic rule in the country engendered new hopes towards the restoration of human dignity and human rights in Nigeria after decades of oppressive military rule. Persons with disabilities, a group that have grappled with marginalization and discrimination in the society, deserve to be part of the emerging new dispensation. The paper highlights the imperatives of human dignity in an effort to goad society into an appreciation of its obligations towards the disabled. Emphasis is placed on the fact that the protection of the rights of the disabled in the envisioned democratic order is and must remain the collective responsibility of the government, the church and private individuals and organisations. Persons with disabilities prefer equal opportunities to charity and the principal duty of government consists in creating an enabling environment for the equalization of opportunities. The church, for its part, has a divine injunction to make a preferential option for the poor and the needy exemplified in the disabled. The integration of the disabled in the society depends ultimately on the cooperation of the individuals, their organisations and their cultural conceptions.

### **Introduction**

It is estimated that one in every eight households in Africa has a disabled person.<sup>2</sup> In Nigeria, this figure could be an understatement. Even without any reliable statistics, it is general knowledge that Nigeria has the worst history of road accidents in the whole of Africa. While thousands of people lose their lives annually on Nigerian roads, many more are disfigured and maimed for life. In a country without health insurance schemes or social securities, the families become the only place of refuge and rehabilitation for these forgotten citizens. There is



hardly any family in Nigeria without a member suffering from one form of disability or another. While disability is a universal anomaly, the tragic note in the Nigerian case is the conspicuous absence of public concern.

The extent of this abject indifference to the plight of the disabled in the Nigerian society became more apparent to me during my search for materials for this paper. Not even the academia have been generous to the disabled in our society. This is because the situation of persons with disabilities and their special needs have not yet found any meaningful treatment or study by our intellectuals. In the evolution of any social change, intellectuals and philosophers have always played leading roles in providing public awareness and goading the conscience of society.

### **Disability and Handicap**

Definitions of what constitute disability have usually been made by different governments and states to reflect the specific objectives of their welfare regulations and schemes. To this we shall return later, but for now we shall make do with the UN delineation in The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities adopted in 1994. Here “people may be disabled by physical, intellectual or sensory impairment, medical conditions or mental illness. Such impairments, conditions or illnesses may be permanent or transitory in nature.”<sup>33</sup> The rules also describe handicap as “the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the life of the community on any equal level with others.”<sup>34</sup> This definition of handicap describes the encounter between the disabled person with the environment. It therefore focuses attention on the shortcomings in the environment and in activities of society that prevent disabled persons from active and equal participation.

The list of the category of disabled persons in Nigeria is endless. Apart from the huge number that result from road accidents, our society is replete with these grossly neglected and often despised citizens. Nigeria fought one of the bloodiest and most brutal wars of the twentieth century. Almost thirty years on, the war victims have absolutely no rehabilitating scheme or social security measures that would make them love this country or our society. Many years of

hardship resulting from misrule and totalitarian oppression have taken their toll on the psyche of the generality of Nigerians. At no other point in our history did we have so many mentally damaged personalities as we now have in the country. Our womenfolk have not been spared in this regard. Despite the general notion that women are the weaker sex, studies have shown that they are more resilient and more stable than men in the face of extreme emotional hardship. This is the single most powerful argument behind the frequent calls in some advanced nations for women to take active part in combat. But the kind of emotional hardship in Nigeria seems to have obliterated this natural advantage of women from mother nature. Everywhere you look, in towns and villages, on the streets and in market places, you find an unusual number of men and women, most of them very young, with mental disability.

Environmental degradation is now also increasing the number of birth defects within our shores. Allied to this is the frequent occurrence of health disabilities like heart attacks, stroke, paralysis and, more recently, AIDS. Unfortunately, man-made disasters are also allowed to swell the number of the disabled in our society. Just recently, a tragic inferno caused by an oil explosion at Jesse led to the loss of almost a thousand lives and left double that number disabled. We were all shocked and ashamed that the primary concern of our government in the face of a disaster of such magnitude was with culprits and saboteurs. Meanwhile, those maimed for life even at their homes are left without any hope of relief or rehabilitation. All these ailments have the added potential of inflicting untold hardship on families if the affected person is the breadwinner.

With regard to the predicaments of the disabled in Nigeria, does our society really value human dignity and human life? What measures ought to be taken by government, the churches, individuals and private organisations to ensure adequate integration of the disabled into the society? These are some of the questions we are going to address in this paper. We shall be looking at models of integration as worked out by societies that have addressed the problems of their disabled. Fortunately, the church's efforts of Justice, Development and Peace to be intensified in the new millennium as demanded by the Holy Father in

his call for National reconciliation, coincides with our national resolve to usher in an equitable and democratic social order during the same period. It is our hope that these models of integration shall be a guide in our efforts to act on behalf of the disabled of our own society. The society we are striving to build must be, in the words of the Holy Father, one "that respects all its members in their dignity, their rights and their freedoms."<sup>5</sup>

### **I. The Imperatives of Human Dignity**

For any society to arrive at an adequate appreciation of the plight of the disabled, it is paramount for it to have the right understanding of human dignity. Perhaps, no other ideal seems so clearly accepted as a universal social good as the idea of the dignity of the human person. National constitutions and recent declarations on human rights make references to it, and various resolutions and declarations of international bodies call the attention of governments and societies to it. Yet, with regard to the disabled, the idea of human dignity seems to have a derogatory acceptance in society. Recently, a group of college students in America were asked whether it would be justified on any ground to exterminate people with severe disabilities. A whooping 65% answered in the affirmative. The result of the survey may appear astonishing, but it is an honest representation of our actions or omissions towards the disabled in society. In other words, it reveals the distorted understanding of human life and of human dignity in our subconscious.

A search for the essence of dignity must begin with its Latin etymological root, '*dignitatis*' which means 'worth', or French *valeur*—intrinsic worth. The UN Charter refers to the 'dignity and worth' of the human person and thus uses two synonyms for the same concept.<sup>6</sup> This helps to reinforce the idea of human dignity as a complex notion of the intrinsic value of an individual. It takes account of the distinct personal identity that is contained in each human individual irrespective of his or her physical or mental condition. In this regard, the term "persons with disabilities" is now frequently used in place of "disabled persons" so as not to give the impression that the ability of an individual to function as a person has been disabled<sup>7</sup>.

Unfortunately, history is replete with cases of the denial of the intrinsic worth of human life as manifested in atrocities perpetrated against the disabled. During the reign of terror in Nazi Germany in the past century, thousands of disabled persons were systematically liquidated by government policy. The controversies surrounding issues of bioethics in recent times show that the world has not changed much since the demise of the Nazi evil empire. There is now a growing tendency to subordinate issues of human life and of human rights to the freedom of scientific research for the benefit of humankind. The discussions over gene manipulation, experiments with human embryos, euthanasia and cloning of human beings come to mind here. Whereas some of these things have been practised discreetly in the past, the alarming thing is the openness with which the cat is now being let out of the bag. According to the Australian ethics professor, Peter Singer, society should be free to apply euthanasia on newly born children with severe disabilities. This is in accord with his belief and teaching that disabled persons are mere biological factors and should therefore be accorded only diminished personality rights. The outcry which this position elicited in Germany in 1996 shows a growing acceptance of the sacredness of life in some civilized parts of the world.<sup>8</sup>

Scripture tells us that every human being is created in the likeness of God: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him (Gen. 1, 27). Under the influence of Platonism, this "image" theology took on prominence in western thought from the time of St. Augustine. St. Paul's words in the New Testament, "Christ is the image of the invisible God" (2 Cor. 4, 4; Col. 1, 15), became the spotlight of this theology. Christ, truly human in all aspects except sin, is not a mere picture of God, but a true representation of Him. What more can one say about human dignity! Each individual, able-bodied or disabled, possesses a basic dignity that comes only from God, and not from race, status or achievement. Christ upheld this truth not only by the force of his incarnation, but also by his preferential option for the poor. St. Matthew tells us that Jesus, before ever he fed the crowd, first of all healed the lame, the maimed, the blind, the dumb and many others with various disabilities (Mt. 15, 29-31).

In imitation of Christ, Catholic social teaching gives a centre stage to

people who are poor and vulnerable. In the Encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work), Pope John Paul II teaches that “The disabled are fully human subjects with corresponding innate, sacred and inviolable rights, and, in spite of the limitations and sufferings affecting their bodies and faculties, they point up more clearly the dignity and greatness of man.”<sup>9</sup> If this teaching is properly understood and universally accepted, society everywhere would have no difficulty in eliminating social marginalization and discrimination against the disabled. Disability is an accident of life that does not diminish or eliminate the human dignity of the person affected. In his recently published memoirs, Fr. Kevin Doherty said that Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, the celebrated philanthropist and social worker of our time, taught him that in any encounter with a disabled person, we are not to look at the disability, but at the person behind.<sup>10</sup> As Nigerians grapple with a new democratic dispensation, they should heed the appeal of the Holy Father “to rid society of everything that offends the dignity of the human person or violates human rights.”<sup>11</sup>

### **The Influence of Society on Individual Identity**

The public must be aware “that individuals have a claim on each other and on society for certain basic minimum conditions without which the value of human life is diminished or even negated.”<sup>12</sup> Church history, and indeed the history of salvation in general, contains two opposing tendencies that have their origin in the Gospel. On the one hand, God accepts us as we are, not on the ground of what we have or what we are aspiring to be, but by virtue of Christ’s work alone. However, accepting us “as we are” does not imply that He takes us as an isolated, self-governing units: He takes us along with all the things that condition and shape our identity—specific time and place, society and culture, our family and group.<sup>13</sup> In other words, to be truly human, we need society, our society, the place and environment without which we cannot feel at home. Solidarity is the eagerness to see others as another “self,” because, as John Donne says, “no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”<sup>14</sup>

Generally, the force of appeal contained in Christian social teaching has not been lost to Christians, but in an increasingly secularised

society, it may not be seen as capable of substantiating the heavy responsibility involved in being our brother's keepers. If ever a societal and political consensus is possible for the provision of measures that would guarantee persons with disabilities the realisation of their human dignity, it must be sought in the area of human rights. This is because "the study of the evolution of the idea of human rights shows that they flow from the one fundamental right: the right to life."<sup>15</sup> There is a general consensus in civilized societies that human life is the highest good and that its protection and preservation demand an overriding priority not only in state authority, but also in every form of human co-existence.

The integration of persons with disabilities becomes, therefore, a major obligation of any society. A world conference on human rights held in 1993 in Vienna, Austria, states in article 22 of its declaration that special attention should be paid to "ensuring non-discrimination, and the equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by disabled persons, including their active participation in all aspects of society."<sup>16</sup> In the following year the UN General Assembly adopted the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. Though not binding, the rules were designed to act as a guide for the international community and to ensure that persons with disabilities exercise the same rights and obligations as others and to help them to participate fully in the activities of the society in which they live.

The emphasis on equal opportunities in the UN rules is of particular significance because it touches on an issue that provides the greatest hurt to the personality and integrity of the disabled, namely, discrimination. It was not possible to utilize the opinions and personal experiences of disabled persons in this work, but there seems to be a general impression that they prefer equal opportunity to charity. The principle of equal rights insists that the needs of each and every individual are of equal importance and that society should employ its resources and services in such a way as to ensure that every individual has equal opportunity for participation.

Most of our discussion so far has been centred on general principles that concern the human dignity and human rights of all persons in

general. It is an indisputable fact that “a person in abject condition, deprived of adequate means of subsistence, or denied the opportunity to work, suffers a profound affront to his sense of dignity and intrinsic worth.”<sup>17</sup> If able-bodied persons suffer all these and more privations in the Nigerian society, it follows that the world of the disabled among us can simply be described as hell on earth. Applied with distributive justice, the principle of equal rights will invariably recognize the intrinsic worth of the disabled and help to focus the attention of our society on their special needs and aspirations.

More often than not, we leave the propriety of these fundamental principles merely on the level of moral appeals. But the truth is that such appeals are taken seriously only by those who make them and very often they lose their strength in the face of general indifference and political pragmatism. There is urgent need to have them reflected in national and corporate constitutions and public policy as part of the necessary instruments of change in our society. The Russian leader, Joseph Stalin, once said that trust is good, but control is better. Time has come to impose a legal obligation on the Nigerian society to promote equality of rights and equality of opportunities for all its citizens, including and especially the disabled ones. The idea of human dignity must be expressed in concrete measures that are not a matter of pragmatic choice. Above all, it must be substantiated in principles that reflect not only the options of a particular religious tradition, but also experiences that emanate from natural human coexistence.

## **II. The Responsibility of Government**

The 1979 Nigerian Constitution states that “every person has a right to life” (Section 30), and that “every person is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person” (Section 31). Though these laconic declarations do not mention persons with disabilities by name, they nevertheless cover their rights as human beings and as Nigerians. However, the problem lies with the provision of adequate regulations and measures that guarantee rights to life and enhance the dignity of persons. In the words of Boutros Boutros Ghali, the former UN Secretary General, “Societies which accommodate human diversity not only respect fundamental freedoms, but mobilize people’s full potential. Disabled

persons challenge the world to grow, and to build a society which advances freedoms and addresses the needs and contributions of all its members.”<sup>18</sup> While the Western world has made remarkable progress in integrating persons with disabilities in their societies, Nigeria is rather retrogressing. It is important, therefore, to borrow from the solutions applied in these societies.

### **Some Western Models of Integration**

Most industrialised nations have quite a good number of social welfare schemes designed to integrate persons with disabilities into their respective societies. But in the age of globalisation of policies, the United Nations has come up with some international measures that seek a uniform application across nations. In December 1991, for instance, the General Assembly adopted 25 principles for the protection of persons with mental illness and for the improvement of mental health care. This was followed in October 1992 with the proclamation of December 3 as International Day of Disabled Persons. The aim was to provide an opportunity to awaken the “consciousness of populations regarding the gains to be derived by individuals and society from the integration of disabled persons into every area of social, economic and political life.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities of 1994 was designed, as mentioned above, to act as a guide for the international community. There are in all 22 rules which serve as preconditions for equal participation of the disabled persons in society. Without going into the details on each of the rules, it serves a useful purpose in view of the responsibility of government to enumerate them:

#### *Rule 1. Awareness-raising*

States should take action to raise awareness in society about persons with disabilities, their rights, their needs, their potential and their contribution.

#### *Rule 2. Medical care*

States should ensure the provision of effective medical care to persons with disabilities.

#### *Rule 3. Rehabilitation*

States should ensure the provision of rehabilitation services to



persons with disabilities in order for them to reach and sustain their optimum level of independence and functioning.

*Rule 4. Support services*

States should ensure the development and supply of support services, including assistive devices for persons with disabilities, to assist them to increase their level of independence in their daily living and to exercise their rights.

*Rule 5. Accessibility*

For persons with disabilities of any kind, States should (a) introduce programmes of action to make the physical environment accessible; and (b) undertake measures to provide access to information and communication.

*Rule 6. Education*

States should recognize the principle of equal primary, secondary and tertiary educational opportunities for children, youth and adults with disabilities, in integrated settings. They should ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the educational system.

*Rule 7. Employment*

States should recognize the principle that persons with disabilities must be empowered to exercise their human rights, particularly in the field of employment. In both rural and urban areas they must have equal opportunities for productive and gainful employment in the labour market.

*Rule 8. Income maintenance and social security*

States are responsible for the provision of social security and income maintenance for persons with disabilities.

*Rule 9. Family life and personal integrity*

State should promote the full participation of persons with disabilities in family life. They should promote their right to personal integrity and ensure that laws do not discriminate against persons with disabilities with respect to sexual relationships, marriage and parenthood.

*Rule 10. Culture*

States will ensure that persons with disabilities are integrated into and can participate in cultural activities on an equal basis.

*Rule 11. Recreation and sports*

States will take measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal opportunities for recreation and sports.

*Rule 12. Religion*

States will encourage measures for equal participation by persons with disabilities in the religious life of their communities.

*Rule 13. Information and research*

States assume the ultimate responsibility for the collection and dissemination of information on the living conditions of persons with disabilities and promote comprehensive research on all aspects, including obstacles that affect the lives of persons with disabilities.

*Rule 14. Policy-making and planning*

States will ensure that disability aspects are included in all relevant policy-making and planning.

*Rule 15. Legislation*

States have a responsibility to create the legal basis for measures to achieve the objectives of full participation and equality for persons with disabilities.

*Rule 16. Economic policies*

States have the financial responsibility for national programmes and measures to create equal opportunities for persons with disabilities.

*Rule 17. Coordination of work*

States are responsible for the establishment and strengthening of national coordinating committees, or similar bodies, to serve as a national focal point on disability matters.

*Rule 18. Organisation of persons with disabilities*

States should recognize the right of the organizations of persons with disabilities to represent persons with disabilities at national, regional and local levels. States should also recognize the advisory role of organizations of persons with disabilities in decision-making on disability matters.

*Rule 19. Personnel training*

States are responsible for ensuring the adequate training of personnel, at all levels, involved in the planning and provision of programmes and services concerning persons with disabilities.

*Rule 20. National monitoring and evaluation of disability programmes in the implementation of the Rules.*

States are responsible for the continuous monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of national programmes and services concerning the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities.

*Rule 21. Technical and economic cooperation*

States, both industrialized and developing, have the responsibility to cooperate in and take measures for the improvement of the living conditions of persons with disabilities in developing countries.

*Rule 22. International cooperation*

States will participate actively in international cooperation concerning policies for the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities.<sup>20</sup>

The rules are directed specifically to national governments irrespective of whether they are industrialized states or third-world states. There are no indications however that any of the rules has been implemented in Nigeria. In contrast, many Western governments have drawn a great deal of inspiration from them.

Long before the adoption of the Standard Rules, Western nations have operated comprehensive welfare schemes for their disabled. But the area of the Rules that has induced a lot of innovations has to do with employment, namely rules 7 and 8, and, to a large extent, rule 6. The Standard Rules recognise the field of employment as “one in which disability-based discrimination has been prominent and persistent,” and recommend that “artificial barriers to integration in general, and to employment in particular, be removed.”<sup>21</sup> One country that has heeded this call is Britain.

In 1995, Britain introduced the Disability Discrimination Bill to provide legal protection against discrimination in employment on grounds of disability. It has since become law. The new measure became necessary because the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act of 1944, which introduced the quota system, was found to be ineffective. The quota system required any employer of 20 or more people to reserve 3 per cent of the work force for disabled persons. Among other things, it made provisions to guard against unfair dismissal of persons with disabilities. However, with no effective pattern of enforcement, it was not possible to get all employers to comply.

The Disability Discrimination Bill of 1995 went all out to redress the shortcomings of the old legal arrangement. It defined a disabled person as “one who has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day to day activities.”<sup>22</sup> The Bill was later amended to include persons with AIDS or symptomatic HIV. It required employers to readjust the working environment to accommodate the special

conditions of the disabled and gave persons with disabilities more right of access to goods, facilities and services.

Under the new arrangement, the disabled in Britain who are qualified to carry out specific jobs are treated on equal terms with their able-bodied counterparts. It therefore becomes a criminal offence for any employer to discriminate against them on the grounds of their disability. The Bill provides the opportunity of enforcement by means of tribunals and set up a National Disability Council to oversee the affairs of the disabled.

The model of integration is more advanced and more complex in Germany, a country with a long tradition of welfare schemes. There are several federal and state social welfare provisions and life insurance schemes, which take charge of the care and rehabilitation of all needy persons in Germany. Although some independent government and church agencies responsible for disabled persons have complained about some shortcomings in some of these provisions, for instance in the Federal Social Welfare Ordinance,<sup>23</sup> the efforts of the government in providing funds and regulating their distribution are impressive.

There is also a Severe Disability Law which has been in operation since 1974 and was amended in 1986. Its main focus is on the provision of equal opportunities of employment for persons with disabilities. The underlying aim of this legal provision is to expand the circle of severe disabled persons to include all persons with at least 50% disability irrespective of the kind and cause of the disability. In other words, "the mere fact of a disability, its severity and the resulting special needs are the only preconditions for relief and rehabilitation."<sup>24</sup> Under this law, the establishment of the type and degree of disability, as well as the issuing of uniform identity cards are the responsibility of the Department of Public Utilities. Highlights of the Severe Disability Law in Germany include:

- 1) The obligation of employers not only to reserve a quota for disabled employees, but also to continue to honour applications from disabled persons even after the obligatory quota has been met. (200 DM are to be paid monthly as compensation for each

- unoccupied quota job place).
- 2) The opportunities given to disabled persons to fully develop their potentials in their places of work.
  - 3) The readjustment and expansion of working environments to suit the special conditions of persons with disabilities.<sup>25</sup>

### **Possible Options for Nigeria**

From the fore-going, it becomes very obvious that the administrations in Nigeria, both civilian and military, have failed woefully in their obligation towards the populace in general and the disabled in our society in particular. The main purpose of government is to care for the needs of the governed. It is our opinion that the emerging democracy offers a welcome opportunity to make amends for past negligence.

A good starting point may well be the realisation that there are some fundamental problems which are inherent in any democratisation process when it concerns human rights. By all account, democracy is an expression of popular and majority will, which is not always sympathetic to the claims of minorities and disadvantaged groups. It is against this background that one speaks of the tyranny of the majority. Human rights, on the other hand, are rooted “in concepts of constitutional processes which recognise the claims to rights and to dignity of all groups and individuals.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, democracy and human rights do come into conflict, and in the case of Nigeria, where the problems to be addressed are legion, the chances are that the disabled will continue to be neglected in the proposed new world order. To prevent this from happening, there needs to be a political decision backed up by state authority. Just as we said at the beginning, we cannot afford to leave the integration of the disabled in our society at the level of moral appeals. The state must provide coercive leadership if the disabled are to be considered in the scheme of things. The Standard Rules worked out by the UN could serve as a valuable guideline in this direction. However, it must be noted that their successful implementation depends on a costly and efficient bureaucracy which Nigeria, at its level of development, is ill-disposed to afford. They therefore should be adapted to the Nigerian situation.

Whatever the immediate bent of the government may be, the following options are indispensable:

### **1) Constitutional and Legal Provisions**

There is hardly any of the rules that can be effectively applied without some constitutional and legal backing. Representatives of government, the churches, pro-democracy and human rights groups, the disabled persons and their organisations should sit in conference and debate issues that concern human rights and a life worthy of human dignity. In other words, welfare and social security decisions must be the product of a democratic consensus, and once this has been done, the society, as represented by the groups mentioned above, should decide how much money it is willing to spend on welfare. It then becomes the responsibility of the government to provide legal and constitutional protection. The inclusion of persons with disabilities in national policy decisions is indispensable to the procurement of adequate knowledge and experience of their conditions and special needs. Such knowledge is absolutely essential for the allocation of funds and for the appointment and training of care personnel.

National legislations should either include references to displaced persons in general provisions or be enacted specifically for persons with disabilities. In whatever form they may appear, the aim should always be:

- (a) To remove or temper the effects of disability,
- (b) To assist all measures that have an independent conduct of life as their aim,
- (c) To support training programmes for befitting jobs and activities,
- (d) To guarantee active participation in the life of society.

No legislation or constitutional imperative can succeed, even in societies where there is rule of law, without adequate parameters for control and enforcement. Government should make sure that whatever legislation or constitutional arrangement is put in place in favour of the disabled is also effectively implemented.

## **2) Education**

It is general knowledge that education has the potential of influencing the attitudes of peoples and the conduct of officials. All these are essential for integration of the disabled in society. The education of the disabled themselves is also of fundamental importance, and government should expand its education policy to cover the rights of persons with disabilities. This is particularly necessary in the case of physically, mentally and socially handicapped children. Education for this group of persons should be readily available and totally free, especially in the primary and secondary levels.

While the establishment of special schools for 'sheltered' education of the disabled will sometimes be inevitable, effort should, as far as possible, be made to provide 'integrated' education for persons with disabilities. In other words, they should be given the opportunity to attend the same schools and the same universities with those without disabilities. That means that existing public schools and proposed new ones should be adapted to the special conditions of the disabled. What use will scholarships be to persons with disabilities if they cannot climb the stairs to the classrooms and research laboratories?

Because of their special needs, disabled persons have great need for vocational training and rehabilitation centres. The remarkable achievements made in this regard in advanced nations have made it possible for persons with disabilities to compete on equal terms with able-bodied persons in the pursuit of employment opportunities. The opportunity given to a disabled person to be self-sustaining is undoubtedly the highest level of integration that can be expected from any society, a thing which is denied to many Nigerian citizens. In a new democratic dispensation, we would like to see the government establish sufficient vocational and rehabilitation centres to take care of the huge number of the disabled and the homeless roaming the streets.

## **3) Economic Prosperity and Political Stability**

We cannot plead the case of the disabled in isolation from the prevailing economic situation in the society. It can be argued that if the society is rich, the disabled among them will relatively be well off and

verse versa. No amount of legislation and no amount of coercive appeal will produce any result if everybody in the society is economically disabled. So the priority of the government in the emerging democracy in Nigeria should be the provision of adequate economic conditions, which are essential for any democratisation to survive and develop.

As mentioned earlier, socio-political tensions are swelling the number of persons with mental disabilities. Every effort should be made by government to guarantee social peace and political stability in the new millennium.

### **III. The Contribution of the Church**

If the history of neglect on the part of government is deplorable, the near absence of church institutionalised welfare centres for the care of the disabled is as unpardonable as it is incomprehensible. In the long tradition of Christian love of the neighbour, the care of the sick and of the disabled belong to the corporal works of mercy that form the most elementary authentication of Christian existence. This finds its justification in Christ's exposition on the Final Judgment: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matt. 25, 40). The Judeo-Christian values derived from the Bible have formed the basis for civil law in Western civilization, and many political and constitutional theories have evolved along lines parallel to Catholic social teaching. The very first Christians in Nigeria in modern times were the disabled, the slaves and the reject of society. They were picked up or purchased, housed, clothed and fed in homes around the mission houses. The Church has therefore been, and still is, at the forefront of welfare activities in many societies around the world and Nigerians are desirous of seeing this happen in the emerging democracy in our own society.

The gigantic humanitarian intervention of the church during the Nigerian Civil War provided inspiration for the foundation of most of the relief organisations in the world today. During the war, Joint Church Aid, the greatest ecumenical relief organisation of all times, carried out the largest airlift since the Berlin Airlift at the end of the Second World War. The Church thus showed to the whole world what



can be achieved with moral resolve, adequate funding, consolidated planning and operational schemes. Unfortunately, all that has since become forgotten history.

A welfare department was established at the Catholic Secretariat in the late 1950s, but it remained irrelevant until 1968 at the height of the Nigerian Civil War. In that year it was re-established and registered as a member of Caritas Internationalis, the international conference of Catholic charities, which was founded in 1951. With massive international funding, the Welfare Department of the Catholic Secretariat effectively coordinated, at the end of the Civil War, the largest relief and rehabilitation project ever carried out on the African continent. The records at the Catholic Secretariat speak for themselves. During and after the war, Hopeville, the rehabilitation centre at Uturu for amputee victims of the war, became a household name nationally and internationally. Technically speaking, both the Welfare Department and Hopeville, the village of hope, have ceased to exist. Among the reasons for this unfortunate turn of event is the failure to realise that the provision of welfare is not an ad hoc undertaking but a continuous and integral part of the spreading of the kingdom of God on earth. The sick, the orphans, the unemployed, the homeless, handicapped youth, the disabled, etc. would want to experience the solidarity of the church in concrete structures. The church, by virtue of its social mission, and by virtue of its humanitarian experience, can and should provide leadership in the integration of the disabled in our society.

#### **IV. The Role of Individuals and Organisations**

The integration of the disabled in the society depends ultimately on the cooperation of the individuals, their organisations and their cultural conceptions. Constitutions, they say, are written in the hearts of the people, and this is because no amount of legislation will reduce the level of discrimination, or enhance fund-raising drives if the people's stereotype attitudes towards the disabled remain immutably negative.

A change in attitudes shall therefore be a determining factor in our option for the disabled in a democratic society. People still look on disability with disdain and families are sometimes ashamed of their mentally disabled members. Ignorance and local taboos often stand in

the way of proper medical attention. These, and many more, are the attitudes that should be eliminated in our society.

Furthermore, the situation of the Nigerian society demands that rehabilitation centres and vocational institutions be urgently established for disabled persons. But our efforts at providing self-sustaining opportunities for persons with disabilities will increasingly result in the replacement of institutional life with an integrated co-existence. In other words, persons with disabilities will need to live and work in public residential and working places and therefore will require the acceptance, solidarity and cooperation of their neighbours and co-workers.

The recognition that disabled persons are dependent on charity for their survival should elicit in us greater willingness to make contributions towards their upkeep. This is an area where organisations and corporate bodies are expected to make an impact. There is need for more service providers and promoters from the private sector.

## **Conclusion**

The protection of the rights of the disabled is the collective responsibility of the government, the church and private individuals and organisations. Since these bodies share common objectives, their efforts should be coordinated and complimented, with the government bearing most of the financial burden. The underlying principles here should be those of subsidiarity and solidarity, namely, of the state entering into contributory partnership with all service providers, and of all sections of society supporting one another.

The term subsidiarity as used in modern secular political terminology<sup>27</sup> is a derivation from Catholic Social Teaching where Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, defined the principle in the following terms:

Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is... a disturbance of right order to assign to a greater or higher association what lesser and

subordinate organisations can do.... The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly.<sup>28</sup>

The establishment of rehabilitation and vocational institutions and the provision of qualified and dedicated care personnel are some of the responsibilities of the state towards the disabled which can be more effectively run by the church and private organisations. We look forward to a democratic world order in which the government gives financial support to the humanitarian efforts of non-governmental agencies. That was what the Holy Father had in mind when he urged the church leaders and government authorities "to work together to serve the well-being of the entire nation."<sup>29</sup>

By the show of solidarity, a well structured society helps its members to develop their personality and achieve their rights. *Homo homini lupus* (man is wolf to man) is Thomas Hobbes' description of a society in which the strong trample upon the rights of the weak and the defenceless. The society we are called upon to build is one in which we are our brothers' keepers. To be healthy, democracy requires the presence of a system of common values.<sup>30</sup> Protecting the rights of persons with disabilities and guaranteeing them a life worthy of human dignity are some of these values. Let us wholeheartedly agree with the Pope that Nigeria's history at the moment "requires concerted and honest efforts to foster harmony and national unity, to guarantee respect for human life and human rights, to promote justice and development, to combat unemployment, to give hope to the poor and the suffering, to resolve conflicts through dialogue and to establish a true and lasting solidarity between all sectors of society."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A Paper Presented at The National Seminar on "The Visit of Pope John Paul II and the Emerging Democracy in Nigeria: The Place of the Disabled," 15 to 16 December, 1998

<sup>2</sup> See John Chege, *Workers' Situation* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Rebecca Wallace, *International Human Rights: Texts and Materials* (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1977), p. 265.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Speech at the Arrival Ceremony," Abuja, Nnamdi Azikiwe Airport, 21 March, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Oscar Schachter, "Human Dignity as a Normative Concept," quoted in Henry J. Steiner & Philip Alston, *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.224.

<sup>7</sup> See Rebecca Wallace, *International Human Rights*, p. 264, n.1.

<sup>8</sup> See Hellmut Puschmann, "Bioethik: Weniger Mensch gibt es nicht," in *Caritas '97* (Freiburg, 1996), p. 197.

<sup>9</sup> *Laborem Exercens* (LE), no. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Doheny, *No Hands but Yours: Memoirs of a Missionary* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1997). p.33.

<sup>11</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Homily at the Holy Mass of Beatification," Oba-Onitsha, 22 March, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW), *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching* (Reproduced by The Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Lagos: 1997), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> See Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), p.7.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in CBCEW, "The Common Good," p.13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Rebecca Wallace, *International Human Rights*, p.264.

<sup>17</sup> Henry J. Steiner & Philip Alston, *International Human Rights in Context*, p.225.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Rebecca Wallace, *International Human Rights*, p. 264.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Rebecca Wallace, *International Human Rights*, p. 287.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.266f.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.290.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Linda Clarke, *Discrimination* (London: Institute of Personnel & Development, 1995, 2nd Ed.), p. 116.

<sup>23</sup> See Klaus Lachwitz & Sabine Wendt, *Hilfen fuer geistig behinderte Menschen im Bundessozialhilfegesetz : Bestandsaufnahme, Perspektiven* (Freiburg I. B.: Lambertus, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> Georg Schmidt, *Schwerbehinderte und ihr Recht: Ein Ratgeber fuer Behinderte und Angehoerige* (Koeln: Bund Verlag, 1997, 2nd edition), p.24.

<sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*, p.22.

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<sup>26</sup> Margherita Rondel, *Whose Human Rights?* (Trentham Books, 1997), p.46.

<sup>27</sup> It has been used in connection with the Maastricht Treaty by which European Union member countries agreed to transfer some legislative authority to the European Parliament.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in CBCEW, *"The Common Good,"* p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Speech at the Arrival Ceremony."

<sup>30</sup> CBCEW, *"The Common Good,"* p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Speech at the Arrival Ceremony."

## Movements of Liberation: Theological Roots and Visions of Dalit Theology<sup>1</sup>

James Massey

First of all, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the Institute of Missiology (Missio) in Aachen (Germany) for inviting me for this Fourth International Consultation and also for asking me to present this paper on the subject “Movements of Liberation: Theological Roots and Visions of Dalits Theology.” I am particularly pleased that “Dalit theology” got a space in this International Consultation, because Indian Dalits many times even find it difficult to be accepted among the oppressed, discriminated and excluded communities of the world. It is because their issue or problem though has longest history, yet it is not visible like the problems faced by their sister communities in the world. This is the reason in this paper, first I have tried to explain the nature of oppression or problem, which the Dalits in India have been facing. Secondly, I have a very brief description of Dalit Movements in India, and finally, I have dealt with the roots and roles or visions of Dalit theology. Therefore the discussion of this paper is divided in the following three parts: [I] Dalit Problem, [II] Dalit Movements, [III] Dalit Theology.

### **I. Dalit Problem:**

The Dalits indeed are one of the earliest settlers or indigenous communities of India, whose today’s problem has a history over 3500 years. (Massey 1991, pages 7, 34-35). Dalits in their history have been addressed by their opponents with many names such as Dasa (slave) or Avarna (without caste or identity) or Achita (untouchable). But those who belong to this group have preferred to address themselves as ‘Dalit’ (broken, or crushed up to the extent of losing original identity). Because ‘Dalit’ is the one expression, which does not merely replace their earlier names (given by others), but it encapsulates all aspects of oppression,

which they throughout the last three and a half centuries have been facing.

Their oppression was not (even today) only limited to the extent of physical suffering, they suffered much more socially, culturally and religiously, which is basically responsible for pushing them into their present state - a state 'with no identity', or 'no people' or 'no nation'. This is the reason the scholars, who have been interested to make them object of their study are willing to place them 'at the bottom of Indian society,' but they are faced with a problem to treat them as a separate class. Because they do not represent any single ethnic identity, they do not possess a common physical form or cultural identity, they do not speak one language, and even they do not have one religion or worship style and they have variety of social life, which makes it further difficult to group them as a single group or class. But the one reality with which all agree is that they do have in common a unique form of discrimination at the hands of high caste people, and this is the primary base for their 'distinct grouping within India'. (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1994, page 6).

It is indeed interesting to note that today through the cumulative domination of caste system and the kind of severe oppression, which the Dalits have suffered or been subjected to, these have turned their life to a most degraded inferior status, which even they have accepted. This conditioning of the mind of the Dalits and the state into which they are pushed, is the one, which makes them different from other low caste considered Indians, who have also suffered either various ritual debasements or are economically poor as well as politically powerless. This state of theirs has given them an identity of 'Untouchable.'

Linked up with their untouchable state, is the extreme economic poverty into which again the Dalits are pushed, through an ongoing economic exploitation by being assigned the lowest and most ritually polluted jobs, which includes on the one side landless labourers (in most cases it is in a real sense bonded slavery) and on the other side the hob considered unskilled (though in a real sense these are skilled), which include skinning animals' carcasses,

tanning leather, shoe-making, weaving, butchery, playing in musical bands, scavenging, cleaning the public roads and streets, coconut plucking and toddy taping. The minds of the members of the Dalits in general even today are completely conditioned with regard to these jobs. This is what the first report of the Government appointed Commissioner of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (1951) says about this. "By the force of habit" a Dalit "has lost his self-respect to such an extent that he regards his work to which his caste is condemned not as a curse from which he should extricate himself, but as a privilege or presence, which he must protect." So this is the extent of the severity of the economic exploitation or oppression, which has made even the poverty as the natural order of the Dalits' life and also it has given him an identity of 'economic slave.'

The Dalits as a corporate body, because of economic slavery clubbed with the conditioned psyche, not only became helpless, but also powerless. They did not lose only their basic economic, social and cultural rights, but also the political rights as well. So this last factor has turned them into a 'non-people politically' or they have become in real sense the 'subject-people'; and their oppressors, who have declared themselves people belonging to upper castes, have become their masters and rulers.

So the above brief reflection on the state of the Dalits, makes a point very clear that today the three-fold problem has become part of their inner being, which they have accepted as part of their natural life, which includes the inferior considered social status, the political powerlessness and the economic poverty (slavery). And these have given them a multi-faceted identity, which tells them, they are untouchables they are subject-people and they are slaves.

Because of the above state of the Dalits, the social and political scientists, who have tried to help them even have got confused with their state of affairs. For example one group has considered them as 'economic slaves', but later according to them with the development of capitalist system, they have become a 'working class'. Therefore this group named today's Dalit consciousness as



‘proletarian consciousness’, which, according to them has come into being as a result of a class struggle with the privileged class. The other group has considered that their whole Dalit struggle is merely for social equality; therefore it is basically a caste problem. But we need to remember that a proletarian consciousness is basically rooted in the economic losses and the caste consciousness circled around the loss of social status. But neither of this is true in the Dalits’ case. Their case is quite different. T. K. Oommen has described it best: “Dalit consciousness is a complex and compound consciousness which encapsulates deprivations stemming from ideological hegemony. Notwithstanding the compound character of Dalit consciousness there existed, and continuing to exist even today, hierarchy of deprivations in the consciousness of the Dalits. This manifested in the nature of responses articulated by them in a couple of centuries.” Oommen makes his statement of “hierarchy of deprivations” more clear by adding: “Therefore, it is not accident[al] that Dalits protest in India first crystallized against socio-cultural oppression, particularly untouchability. This was followed by mobilization for political enfranchisement. Finally, protest against economic exploitation gradually emerged.” (Oommen, 1990, p.256). In the next part of this paper on ‘Dalit Movements’ we will see how these movements tried to deal with this three-fold problem of the Dalits.

## **II. Dalit Movement**

Dalit Movements or struggle historically is one of the longest, which began during the Vedic period and is continuous through out the Muslim period (600 B. C. - A. D. 1700). It reached to its climax during the British period (A.D. 1700-1947) and is continuing also during the post Independence period – since A. D. 1947 till date (Massey, 1998, pp. 121-142). During the Vedic and Muslim periods, the foundation of the Dalit struggle as well as Dalit consciousness were laid down. During the British period the Dalit struggle or movement continued around the question of separate identity and the political rights of the Dalits, and during

the post Independence period, the Dalit movement is centred around the solidarity and the visions of their liberation.

As mentioned earlier during the Vedic and Muslim periods the various Dalit movements were concerned about spiritual and cultural equality, which was begun by the founders of Jain and Buddhist religions (between 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> B.C.) and later on these were led by Hindu and Muslim saints during the Bhakti (devotion) movement (medieval period). But it was during the British period when the Dalit consciousness took the real roots. Part of the Dalit consciousness, the first thing which became clear to the Dalits was the realization of the fact that they are the first dwellers of the land namely India; and the second realization was that the Hindu social order based upon the caste system was responsible for their Dalit-ness. So it became important for them to regain their original status and also to reject not only the Hindu caste, but also that religion as a whole. It is in this context that the various conversion movements from Hinduism to other religions, including Christianity, need to be understood. The most important Dalit leader, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's conversion, along with his followers more than half million, to Buddhism in 1956 was the climax of this move of the Dalits. A few examples of the Dalit movements from different parts of the country are given here. In South India the movements were the Adi-Dravida Mahajan Sabha (1890), Adi-Andhra Mahajan Sabha (1917), Adi-Keralotharana Sangham (1972) and Adi-Karmataka Sangh (1930); and in North India the main movements were Adi-Dharam in Punjab (1926), Adi-Hindu movement (1921) in U. P. and All Bengal Namasudra Association (1912) in Bengal.

Both during the British and in the post Independence periods, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar played the most leading role. Dr. Ambedkar was born on 14 April 1891 at Mhow in central India and he died on 6 December 1956 in New Delhi. He worked and dedicated his life for his Dalit community from the time of his entry into the Dalit struggle in 1919 till his death. Dr. Ambedkar believed in the total liberation of the Dalits and to achieve this goal, he prescribed a formula, which included organising themselves and education of

the people. The protest and agitation was the third organ of his formula. By following this formula, he led the Dalit Movement till his death and he succeeded also in getting the number of constitutional rights for the Dalits in the areas of politics, economy and social life of the country.

The story of Dalit Movement continues, in fact, it got a real momentum in the post-Independent period. During this period it took the form of political parties, protests and struggle for unity and solidarity. During this period a lot of protest literature came into existence. Among the political parties the Republican Party of India (RPI) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) are the best examples.

Part of the ongoing Dalit Movement, which needs our attention, is the Dalit Solidarity Peoples' (DSP) movement. DSP came into existence as an inter-faith movement in December 1992, with the following four points agenda. First, to strengthen the solidarity among the Dalits all over the country – to achieve this goal it proposed to have ongoing consultations in different regions with a view to acquainting the people with the programme and to create a network. Second, to extend its full co-operation to the Tribal people to achieve their full rights as indigenous people in our country. Third, to liberate the education system that has been used as an instrument of oppression against the Dalits! Part of the education programme of DSP includes a construction of common ideology, which will serve as a basis for the future Dalit movement. Fourth, to internationalise the movement, and create the awareness among the members of international community about the problem, discrimination, oppression and loss of human dignity of the Dalits. The working methodology of DSP included the publication of literature, conducting seminars, workshops, lobbying, exchange of visits at the national and global level.

DSP today is a national inter-faith movement of the Dalits spread out in more than 20 states of India. The leadership of DSP is drawn from the Dalits belonging to Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians. The overall goal of this movement is "the liberation of the whole Dalit community as well as of their 'oppressors' and in this way... Dalits become an instrument of establishing a 'just

society' where all will live with fuller redeemed dignity and recovered humanity." (Massey, 1998, p. 195).

### **III. Dalit Theology:**

Here in this part of the paper, first I want to deal with the meaning of the expression 'Dalit theology'. It is true, 'Dalit theology' as one of the expressions of theology is new or even perhaps youngest among the various theological expressions of the world, including India. But at the same time it is also true that the roots of Dalit theology go back right to the beginning of Dalit history. This fact even becomes very clear in the Old Testament where the Dalits are a part of God's overall plan for human redemption or liberation. In fact the prophetic messages have specific reference to the Dalit community by name as part of God's concern (Isa 11:4, Zep 3:12). Also Dalit history tells us that their opponents, particularly their first colonizers, the so-called Aryan in India, made all kinds of efforts to see that the Dalits' relationship, on one side with God and on the other side with human beings should get completely severed. This was the reason why during Bhakti movement Dalit saints like Ravidas wanted to re-establish the relationship of their community back to God. All the conversion movements in India were part of this process. So in this way, if theology is a critical reflection on the relationship of God and human beings in different historical situations, then one can see the roots of Dalit theology going back right to the time of the beginning of their present history.

About the need of Dalit theology, it must be pointed out, first, that the existing traditional theologies, which include European Systematic theology as well as the present India Christian theology are irrelevant for the Dalits, because these are neither based on their life experiences nor do they fulfil the needs of Dalit life. These do not address the issues faced by the Dalits in their daily life, rather they fulfil the needs of the rich and elite, who have got themselves placed caste-wise on the 'top' or 'above', while the Dalits have been forced to be placed at the 'bottom' or 'below' by the same rich and elites. Therefore, when the Dalit theologians

refer to Dalit theology, they are in fact making an affirmation about the need of a theological expression, which will address and help them in search of their daily bread, to overcome their life situation of oppression, poverty, suffering, injustice, illiteracy and denial of their human identity or dignity. So these realities of Dalit life form the reason(s) for the formulation of Dalit theology.

Here one important point to be noted is that the term 'Dalit', when added as a prefix to 'theology', serves as a pointer to the role of this theological expression. The term 'Dalit' refers to the 'state' into which the people, who address themselves with this name are living. This is an oppressive state, into which they have been forced to live for centuries, by their opponents or oppressors. Dalits of today have realized their personal as well as community state of oppression. The main factor behind this realization is their history, which has helped them to know about their past lost identity, which their opponents had deliberately tried to destroy. From their history, the Dalits have also learned how systematically their oneness has been destroyed by introducing among them hundreds of human divisions by naming them on the basis of their assigned names according to various low level of works assigned to them. This realization of the Dalits has forced them to engage themselves in the quest of 'solidarity' in order to once again regain their oneness. But finally it is Dalit theology, which is going to help them in placing the various actions of the past and present in the theological context, as an assurance of what they have done or are doing right in the sight of God. This is about the meaning of Dalit theology, but it is actually supposed to be rooted as pointed out earlier in their history and in their move toward solidarity on the basis of the historical incarnational act of God Himself. Therefore these two bases of Dalit theology (history and solidarity) need our special attention before we discuss the role or visions of Dalit theology. Therefore the remaining discussion of this paper we will undertake under the following three sub-heads: (a) Importance of Dalit History, (b) Dalit Solidarity and (c) Dalit theology and its role. (See for detail discussion Massey, 1998, pp. 167-190)

**(a) Importance of Dalit History:**

In India there are a number of leaders both in the Church and others, who say “We should not talk about the past”. In other words what they are saying is that we should forget our history. Non-Church thinkers who hold such opinions include political ideologists, who belong to power-blocks of either so-called upper castes or classes, who are afraid of losing their power or power structures. On the other hand Church leaders or thinkers include either those who have been brain-washed through the Western theological education or those who hold power within the Church structures by virtue of being converts from the so called upper castes. But along with these two categories of Church groups opposed to recognising or acknowledging the past are a number of Church leaders, who themselves are of Dalit origin, because of the fear that they or their forbears would be exposed. Of course, they are also brainwashed by the old missionary theological thinking that everything that we had, whether religious beliefs, or ideologies, or practices are evil or contrary to our Christian faith. Such groups of people also ask why should we remind ourselves of our past, because it means going back to where we started.

There are many other arguments which can be offered on behalf of those who oppose the idea of referring to their past or past history. But we need to remember that it is only our past history that can tell us about our past identity. This is particularly true in the case of those in our society, who are not only living a degraded life of poverty today, but have also lost their very humanness. Here I mean the members of the various Dalit communities. Many of them look as if they have regained their lost humanity or dignity, because they are now educated or are not living a life of poverty. But the vast majority of these people are mentally poor or their attitudes towards their own self is not fully human. Such cases are also proving a point that mere economic upliftment or just formal education is not enough for their regaining a full humanness or dignity. The efforts of Christian churches, the Indian government and most of the non-governmental organisations have been mostly limited to this, in dealing with the situation of the Dalits. Therefore

for us as Dalits, history is very important, because till now historians either in general or particularly Church or religious historians do not represent the views of our people. But we do need to know our past, which alone will reveal to us that once we were also full human beings, enjoying all the benefits of a normal human being, which include land, property, human dignity, natural resources and human freedom. But this will not be possible until our history is written from our point of views, that is the 'view from below.' Because till now the views, which exist whether concerning history or theology or ideology are from 'above', meaning that they are either produced by the so called upper caste Christians or from the European background (mostly) representing the same 'view from above'. Therefore Dalits' history from their point of view, that is 'from below', has to be prepared now, because this will be the first step toward re-constructing the Dalit theology, which in fact will become the basis for recovering their lost human dignity.

On the question of the past history of a 'slave nation', to whom God gave liberation and made a 'nation' – the same God commanded through Moses that they have to tell their past history of slavery and freedom to their children from generation to generation - the words of the Bible.

When your children ask you, in the time to come, "what is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?" Then you shall say to your children, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mightily hand... If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in right." (Deu 6:20-25)

The Bible also tells us that whenever this nation ignored this commandment, God again sent them back to a life of slavery and whenever they realised their mistake, He liberated them. In this sense, Indian Christians, particularly the Dalit Christians have not begun their history, because generally speaking they have

continuously denied their past. In the New Testament St. Paul reminds also the Dalit Christians that they should always remember their past, how God, out of nothing, has made them 'something' or a 'people' (1 Cor 1:26-28). This much about the importance of Dalit history, now here a few observations are offered on the 'Dalit Solidarity,' which will help us to know how Dalit theology is related on one side with God and on other side with the solidarity relationship of Dalits themselves.

### **(b) Dalit Solidarity:**

The expression 'solidarity', I am proposing here to use in place of 'historical praxis', which has been used by the Latin American liberation theologians (such as Gustavo Gutierrez). These two expressions share the basic meaning, but still for the Dalit context in India, I believe 'solidarity' is the most suitable expression, which can help us to rediscover the core message of Christian faith from the Dalit perspective. The meaning of 'solidarity' in Pope John Paul II's pastoral letter 'On social Concern' is given as "...solidarity (that is) ...a commitment to the good of one's neighbour with the readiness, in the Gospel sense to lose oneself for the sake of the other." This letter also further says: "Solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue. In what has been said so far it has been possible to identify many points of contact between solidarity and charity, which is the distinguishing mark of Christ's disciples." (Pope John Paul II, 19 pp. 74, 78) According to Gutiérrez, the meaning of 'Christian praxis' or 'historical praxis' is almost the same, when he says: "In the first place, charity has been fruitfully rediscovered as the centre of the Christian life ... love is the nourishment and the fullness of faith, the gift of one's self to the other, and invariably to others. There is the foundation of the praxis of the Christian, of his active presence in history." But he adds also, "According to the Bible, faith is the total response of man to God." (Gutierrez, 1973, p. 7).

But when we say, 'solidarity' is the action as our response to God, what does it really mean? To begin with it means that God himself first has shown His 'solidarity' with human beings in



history. But we also need to remember, God's being in solidarity with us was not just as an idea, but it was in the form of concrete 'action' or 'actions' in human history. The Bible very clearly witnesses about God's historical action which began with His first action of creation (Gen 1 and 2). We see Him in full solidarity with human beings, while visiting the human beings in the Garden of Eden. But then the concrete reality of 'sin' enters into human history (Gen 3). The expansion of human beings' sin as a historical reality can be seen taking place in Gen 4 -11. After that we also see that God began direct intervention in human history by calling Abraham (Gen 12 onward). The Bible writers, in order to concretise God's action of solidarity, picked up a case history of a nation, namely Israel, who with time became a slave nation in Egypt. But God saw their suffering and oppression, which they had from the hands of their oppressors, Pharaohs of Egypt, and He decided to help them through Moses (Exod 1:8-14; 2: 23-25). While commissioning Moses, he said "I have witnessed the misery of my people in Egypt and have heard them crying out because of their oppressors. I know they are suffering and have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians..." (Exod 3:7, 8). Here we see God not only offering his solidarity with the oppressed in words or in ideas, but in actions; He became a part of their struggle. His action shows that He took a definite side of the oppressed against the oppressors. This was not a religious action, but it was more of a political act, which included even economic and social dimensions. God fought against the Egyptians on behalf of the Israelites through Moses till they received a complete liberation. Later, God was fully involved in the history of Israel and other nations through His prophets, Kings, and ordinary men and women.

The climax of God's solidarity with human beings, particularly with the oppressed people of this world can be seen in His incarnational act. The summary of this act of God we find in John 1:14. Here we find that through the act of incarnation, God not only identified with human beings by becoming a human being, but he also fully became a part of human history by making "his

home among us". A concrete picture of God's solidarity with us can be seen in Luke 2: 1-7. Here we find a human child "wrapped... in swaddling clothes, laid... in a manger" (Luke 2:7). With this, two of the Old Testament prophecies about God's participation in human history got fulfilled. It was prophet Isaiah who prophesied "A young woman... will give birth to a son", who will be called "Emmanuel" means "God with us" (Isa 7:14). The same prophet said that God as a human being will have "no form or comeliness" (Isa 53:4). So here (as part of the fulfilment of these prophecies) in the act of incarnation, we meet God in full solidarity with us, not just as any human being, but one who became the poorest of the poor (in real sense a Dalit), who lost his other worldly identity completely for our sake. This is what the expression solidarity means and which we find in the historical incarnational act of God, indeed challenges the Dalit Christians to follow it, so that their common experiences (along with the Dalit in general) should become the basis of an authentic Dalit theology.

### **(c) Dalit theology and its Role:**

Concerning the Dalit theology, the first thing we need to remember is that like most of other sister liberation theologies, it is a theological expression, which has taken birth on one side from the historical experience of oppressed people, who address themselves by the name 'Dalit' and on the other side their encounter with the God of the Bible, who has always been the basis towards the oppressed and historically poor. It is also based upon the Dalit assumption that they themselves are the makers of their history, which means that they are the 'subject' of their history, not an 'object', which the histories constructed by their opponents have tried to show throughout the ages. This of course is the first step towards the Dalit liberation, because in real truth it is they (today's Dalits) of Indian Society, who represent the divinely undivided humanity of the created world. This is their original state, which Dalit theology is supposed to enable them to recover. This 'divinely undivided humanity' is their original state that their opponents have tried to destroy intentionally.

The concrete results of their opponents' onslaught upon their very humanity, resulted to the loss of their other rights, which included educational, social economic, cultural, political, spiritual and religious. The recovery of all these now depends upon their solidarity. Only their commitment to their solidarity can generate power among themselves to face the challenge of their opponents. This solidarity is again two sided, a commitment to God on one side and a commitment to their fellow Dalits (who may belong to any religion, creed, ideology) on the other side. Now this dual commitment to solidarity is in real sense the subject of the Dalit theology.

It becomes very clear that the Dalit theology is a reflection on the solidarity of the Dalits. Behind this solidarity-based-relationship, are a number factors, which play a role: (1) the aspiration of the Dalits for their full liberation; (2) God is on their side and is interested to empower them to work for the transformation of this world, where full justice will again reign; (3) Jesus Christ is the model in whom God concretely became human to struggle along with the Dalits in their struggle, for their liberation and now He continues to do the same through the Holy Spirit.

Dalit theology, as understood by some is not a counter-theology as compared to the traditional theologies, which include the European constructed Systematic theology or the Indian Christian theology formulated and adopted by the so-called upper caste considered Christians. Because these traditional theologies were neither intentionally formulated as enabling theological expressions to deal with the life issues of the Dalits nor were these based upon the experiences (past or present) of the Dalits.

In the same way, Dalit theology cannot be replaced with any of the liberation theologies as sometimes attempts have been made to do so. It is particularly true with South American born 'Liberation theology', with which some Indian theologians have tried to mix up the Dalit theology. It is true that Dalit theology has the common features with 'Liberation theology' on the question of history as well as in the general goal i.e. 'the whole liberation of the whole people,' but on the question of the actual history, context, racial

elements, ideological basis, almost all the liberation theologies are different. For examples our African brothers and sisters in North America were brought there by force and not by choice. On the other hand South Americans who have gone through a kind of economic oppression in Europe and later on gave birth to today's 'Liberation theology' are racially from the same stock as their oppressors. South American liberation theology is based upon the economic class system, whereas in North America, oppression is based on colour, culture, social and slave-master relationship giving rise to 'Black theology'. In the same way, the Korean based 'Minjung theology' is the outcome of ordinary people's pain, their frustrations, their agonies and their sufferings, along with their hopes, aspirations and struggle.

But when we talk about Dalit theology or Dalit people's experiences, the situation changes immediately. Here the Dalits, unlike their above sister communities of different countries, have lost everything. Dalits' story of oppression is also too long as compared to any other groups of the world. As was the case with their lost history, the Dalits have lost almost everything, including their land, culture, language, colour, religion and political/social rights. For them everything has to begin anew. Here their opponents, who as colonizers came at different stages of history, have today become the owners or masters of not only the resource material that belonged to the Dalits, they even became the owners of the Dalits. So the enslavement of the Dalit is multi-faceted, which even the Dalits today themselves have accepted as reality. In this way the historical context is enough to show that Dalit theology cannot be categorised with any other group, either traditional or liberation theologies.

Beside the above difference Dalit theology also differs from others in its role, which include: First, it has to address the Dalits themselves about their state and their consciousness. It can also help in raising the consciousness of the Dalits to the fact that they are the remnant of a casteless community, based upon a divinely established principle of equality (as against the caste based divided communities, which is the handiwork of human beings). The Dalit

theology also has to raise their consciousness to the fact that their assigned inferior status is neither of their own creation, nor a divinely created reality, but is imposed on them by a humanly created system. Therefore the Dalit theology has to prepare the Dalits to reject the old caste based religious order, which has perpetuated their captivity, because this will pave a way toward their full liberation.

Second, the Dalit theology has also to address the non-Dalits, both within the Church as well as outside, because the opponents or the oppressors of the Dalits have equally lost their original divinely created humanity. The role of the Dalit theology with regard to this will make them conscious about the suffering and pain of the Dalits and also about their own non-humanity, which allows them to treat the Dalits oppressively. Again the Dalit theology will help them in regaining their humanity.

Third, the Dalit theology has to play a role in raising the consciousness of the Church/Christian Community as a whole. The current traditional theologies have been playing a role which has forced the Church to maintain the status quo or existing order of political, economic, social, religious, cultural, and caste-based divisions, not only outside, but within the Church life also. So it is the Dalit theology, which can challenge the Church to change her stand, with regard to all these structures. In this way the Dalit theology will help the Church to become an instrument of change.

Fourth, the Dalit theology has to enable the ordinary Christians to take active part in the struggle of the Dalits. Presently even the ordinary members of the Christian community in India are convinced that it is against the teaching of Christian faith to join any struggle or movement. But as seen in the last section on 'Dalit Solidarity', Our Lord Himself in His incarnational act of solidarity has shown the way to us.

Fifth, Dalit theology has to create the possibility of full liberation or salvation, basing upon the Christ event of redemption, which will not only involve in freeing the Dalits from the oppressive structures, not merely making it possible to become subject of human or their own history or even having an experience of

personal forgiveness of sins, but to achieve the whole salvation for the whole people of God including their oppressors. And this way the Dalit theology will enable the Dalits to become an instrument of establishing a 'just society'.

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Presented at Missio International Consultation: Theme: "The Jubilee Contextualized in Marginalized Africa Today" Uganda Martyrs University, Nkozi, Uganda - 4 May 2000

## The Sharia in Nigeria: Issues and Perspectives<sup>1</sup>

By

+John Onaiyekan

### **Introduction:**

First I must express deep appreciation to the organisers of this national seminar for inviting me to contribute my little quota to this great discussion on Sharia in Nigeria. I am particularly grateful because this seminar is being organised by an Islamic organisation; the Jama'atu Nasril Islam. It is a gesture that points to the right direction by opening channels of dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. I hear there are plans by a Christian group to organise a national seminar also on the Sharia as seen from a Christian perspective. I hope they will not forget to invite Muslim scholars to participate also. This is the way forward so that we can mutually understand where we stand. Incidentally this is the second time I am finding myself in this rather interesting situation. I already had occasion some fifteen years ago to address an audience of Muslim intellectuals at the University of Ibadan. Again at that time the topic was on the Sharia.<sup>2</sup> (1) Much of my ideas at that time has not changed much even though I have since then done more reading and study on the Sharia.

In this paper I will try my best to be as clear as possible. I presume that the organisers want to hear the frank views of a Christian; and not just a Christian but also one who is considered a leader among Nigerian Christians. That being the case, you will understand that I may not say things the way you normally would say them. Furthermore, you should not be surprised if I propound opinions that may be quite different from those that you have been hearing in this seminar since the past three days. Nevertheless, I will also make every effort to be polite in what I say, so as not to offend anyone. But if I do not succeed in this regard, I want to ask your pardon right away. I want to stress that it is not my intention to offend anyone.

The topic assigned to me in the letter of invitation reads: “The Sharia and the Nigerian Constitution: Issues and Perspectives.” I have taken the liberty to modify this title slightly into “The Sharia in Nigeria: Issues and Perspectives.” I will indeed talk about the Sharia in the Nigerian Constitution but I believe that this has to be placed within the wider context of the Sharia in Nigeria. This is because I believe the Sharia is more than just a constitutional issue. I have therefore decided to arrange my ideas along the following lines. After a few observations on the Nigerian context I will share some brief ideas on the religious angle of our discussion. This will lead me to a brief discussion on the famous debate on “*Secularity in Nigeria*.” It is only then that I will focus on the Sharia in the Nigerian Constitution. I will then conclude with some points on the issues and perspectives that flow from our discussion.

### **The Sharia in Nigeria:**

One of the main causes of difficulties in discussing our topic seems to me to be the fact that the concept of the Sharia itself is not always very clear even among those who claim to be experts on it. It is not enough to say that the Sharia is the Islamic Law or the injunctions of the Islamic faith. It is necessary in the context of our own discussion to spell out very clearly what precisely we mean. This is all the more necessary since it seems to me that the actual practice and implementation of the Sharia can and has taken different forms among different communities of Muslims. The history of Sharia in Nigeria proves this beyond any doubt. This is why the steps taken by the Zamfara State Government may eventually help to clarify issues since we now have a project that is clearly articulated and available for study and assessment.<sup>3</sup>

Some people keep insisting that the Sharia concerns only Muslims, and that other Nigerians need not worry about it. Unfortunately, as the debates and controversies generated in the recent months are unfolding, it must be clear to anyone who wants to be realistic that it indeed concerns all Nigerians. We are not basically concerned here with the Sharia in the abstract. We are concerned with the Sharia



within the concrete context of Nigeria, as we presently know our nation to be constituted. It is not enough to bring models from other nations who have histories and geographies very different from ours. Those models may serve as at best possible examples, but not as final point of reference. It is necessary that the discussion on the Sharia take into consideration the nation in which we live, how it is religiously constituted and the political evolution that we have gone through. We need also to consider where we think we expect our nation to go, what is the future that we envisage for ourselves and what kind of organisation of society required in order to achieve this objective. This, of course, brings up the whole issue of whether we have a common vision towards which we are working. May be our present debate will help to clarify that basic issue.

In any case, since we are talking of Nigeria, there is one important factor that in my opinion needs to be specifically stressed. It was the Archbishop of Algiers, Henri Tessier, visiting me in Ilorin some years ago, who drew my attention to this important fact, namely that **Nigeria is the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world.** By this he meant that there is no country in the world where you find as many Christians living side by side with as many Muslims within the same country. There are nations with Christians and Muslims but often however with one dominant over the other. Even where Christians and Muslims are fairly balanced, the population would be much inferior to ours.

The conclusion that we draw from this simple observation is that Nigeria cannot simply copy what may seem a perfect model elsewhere. We must fashion out our own model of Christian-Muslim relationship. This is important in our discussion not only on the Sharia but on the position of religion within our public life. It is my strong conviction that in a world that is becoming more and more integrated into what is now called a "global village", Christians and Muslims on the global level will have to find a way of relating together not as majority versus minority but simply as followers of two different religions that have so much in common and yet have basic differences. I believe that in this search for a global *modus convivendi* or a way of living together

between Christians and Muslims, Nigeria has a great role to play. We should be showing the world how Christians and Muslims can live in mutual respect and equality. We should aim at proving to the world that it is possible and that it is indeed the way forward. It is my prayer that our nation will succeed in this challenge.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Religious Angle:**

There is no doubt that there is a religious angle to the question of the Sharia in Nigeria. It is my strong position that from the point of view of religion, there need not be any difficulties in our living together. Since we agree that every Nigerian can practice whatever religion he chooses to practice, it means therefore that every person is free to be ruled by the dictates and the injunctions of his or her own faith. So to the extent that the Sharia is considered by Muslims as the law of their faith, they have not only the right but I imagine also the duty to ensure that their lives are guided by the dictates and the injunctions of their faith as expressed in the Sharia. It is a question of how to live our lives in accordance with God's will. On this point thanks be to God there is no division or disagreement whatsoever.

Even in our **African Traditional Religion**, the people believe that their lives should be guided by the injunctions of the religion as it is understood. The will of the gods should prevail and this will is pursued and searched for in a variety of ways. Any major decision has to be submitted to the guidance of those who can determine what is the will of the divinities. This is a basic element of human religious feeling: to be guided by the Supreme Being in all that one does.

In **Christianity**, we certainly hold firm to the fact that our daily life is guided by the injunctions of the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Indeed Jesus has presented himself to us as "the Way, the Truth and the Life". (John 14:6) You are not a Christian if your life is not guided by the injunctions of the Lord Jesus Christ. Put it differently, you are not loyal to your Christian faith if you do not live according to the Christian injunctions. **Christian injunctions mean the way we live our whole life, "Whether you eat or you drink, whatsoever you do at all, do it for the glory of God."** (I Corinthians

10:31) I believe this point should be stressed in an audience such as this. Sometimes, Muslims claim that in Islam there is no difference between life and religion. You should be glad to know that this is true of Christians too. Sometimes it is further said that we Christians can distinguish between religion and politics, while Muslims don't. I want to state here in this forum quite categorically that we agree completely with the Muslims in this regard. For us too, even politics must be under God's injunctions.

The famous biblical statement: "Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's" (Luke 20:25), is addressing a totally different issue. Both Caesar and his coins belong to God. And so within the Christian community in its different forms in Nigeria, we are guided by our religious norms. In the church to which I belong, we have a body of Catholic moral norms, as well as the Code of Canon Law, which guide everything that we do. We do our best to follow these rules and ideals. We may not always succeed but at least we know where we are going. Therefore from the point of view of desire to follow God's will, there is no need whatsoever for any quarrel between Christians and Muslims. We both agree and I think we should thank God that we live in a nation where all the citizens want to be ruled by God's will.

The problem arises of course when it comes to determining in the concrete in what exactly consists God's will. We know for a fact that we do have some differences in this regard. But even then the basic norms of morality are common to all; you shall not kill, you shall not be wicked to your neighbour, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not bear false witness, etc: all these are equally condemned by all the religions of Nigeria. Probably, if we concentrate on these basic elements of moral behaviour, the nation would certainly be a much better place. From the point of view therefore of the issues under discussion, the major question is not whether Muslims should be guided by the Sharia, they certainly must be. Nor is it whether Christians should be guided by their religious norms, they have the duty to submit to these norms. The question rather is whether these religious norms must be implemented and enforced by legal

instruments of government, precisely as religious laws. This is where we must focus our attention. This brings us then to the famous debate on the “secularity” of the Nigerian state, within which the debate of the Sharia must be located.

### **The Secularity Debate:**

It is often said especially in Christian circles but also in the circles of those who claim to be more of the non-religious persuasion that Nigeria is a secular state. This statement is problematic. We need to explain what we mean by a secular state. Precisely because of the ambiguity of the concept of secularity, the debate on this issue during the 1978 Constitutional Conference was very prolonged. It will be recalled that the draft of the constitution did specifically state that *Nigeria shall be a secular state*. This particular position of the draft was subjected to serious argument because of the equivocacy in the terminology “secular”. Those who wrote this statement in the draft constitution explained what they meant namely that Nigeria shall not be ruled in its government in terms of any particular religion. But many of the members of the constitutional conference objected to the expression secular because in their opinion it can be interpreted to mean that the government of Nigeria will be godless. They also pointed to the example of many countries which describe themselves as secular and on that basis deny religion. It is as a matter of compromise that that sentence was eventually expunged from the constitution. In its place, we have the famous statement in paragraph 10 of the 1979 constitution which says that: “The government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.”

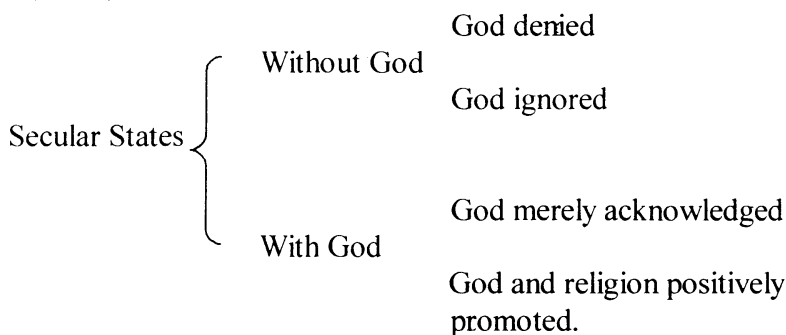
This formulation contains the spirit of what was meant by a secular state although by presenting it that way it excludes any interpretation of secularity in any godless direction. However it also leaves open the issue of when does a particular action of government constitute adopting a religion as a “state religion”? I believe this is the debate presently raging on the actions taken by the state governments who claim to install the Sharia. Let us look a little bit more carefully again

at this concept of secularity as used in regard to the state.<sup>5</sup>

This is an expression that is very much linked with the English Language and it comes ultimately from its Latin root *saeculum* meaning “this world”. Therefore “secular” simply means “of this world”, as distinct from something of the world to come. When looked at from this rather neutral fashion it says nothing whatsoever about whether God is involved or denied. In actual fact, right now in the world, there are many kinds of secular states. These can be divided into two; there are secular states without God and secular states with God. Among secular states without God there are states which actually deny God in the way that the state is run and therefore persecute religions. Then there are states which simply decide that God does not come into the art of governance and should be kept out of all official public affairs. Countries that are of these two types are rather few in the world of today. There were cases, especially in the old communist regimes where it was a basic item on the national constitution that the nation was atheistic. Since the last ten years, this has changed considerably.

More relevant to our discussion are the nations that declare that they are secular but recognise God. They either simply tolerate religion or they indeed encourage religion. In all these cases, the important point being made is that there is no state religion. The example of a secular state that is often quoted is precisely the United States of America where the constitution clearly makes a distinction between religion and government life. Yet in the United States of America, religion is highly promoted not only among the people but also with government support. We know that the United States Armed Forces has huge well organised chaplaincies for Protestants, Catholics, Jews and of recent we hear also of the Islamic. And this is a nation which claims to be secular. On the American dollar, the motto of the nation is “In God We Trust”.

### Forms of Secular States:



Thus, there are many ways of being a secular state. If we decide not to use the word “secular”, so be it. But the main point being stressed is that a Nigerian will always enjoy his/her full right no matter his/her religion or indeed his/her non-religion, on every square inch of our national territory.

Incidentally, in the French-speaking countries the expression used is, not “secular” but “*laïque*” or “lay”. The French have had a history of church and clerical predomination over public life. But since the French Revolution, the direction has been to keep the clergy out of public life so that the running of public affairs be in the hands of “lay people”. That is why the expression “*l’état laïque*” has become the normal way of expressing what in English is called “secular state”. I have just returned from Guinea Conakry and the president of Guinea used precisely that expression to describe the nation of Guinea. He was talking to a group of Catholic Bishops who paid him a courtesy call in the presidential villa. He took the occasion to once again confirm or reiterate the fact that in Guinea government operates on the basis of “*l’état laïque*”, of a state where no religion is official and where every Guinean can practice his religion and hold any post provided he is working for the good of the people. You will understand that the statement drew an applause from his audience.

Coming back home it seems to me that the debate on secularity has to continue until better clarity is achieved in this matter. What exactly does paragraph 10 of our constitution mean? We know for sure that

the government is in many ways involved with religion. Our leaders often call on the name of God and religious services are held on many state occasions. We also have chaplaincies not only within the Armed Forces but also in our government institutions of higher learning. For sometime government had massively supported pilgrimages to holy places, an issue that became a bone of contention. Similarly, government has been financing a national mosque and a national ecumenical centre. All these are issues where government has become, justifiably in my opinion, involved in religion. The question is how far can government go?<sup>6</sup> And when the Zamfara state government declared that Sharia is now the law of their state has it gone against the provisions of paragraph 10 of our constitution? Is this tantamount to declaring an Islamic State? This is a legal and constitutional issue that must be resolved, and done quickly by those whose duty it is to do so. It is my candid opinion that government has not taken its responsibility in this matter serious enough. It should go beyond the present attitude of "Let us wait and see how far they will go".

There are those who are suggesting that paragraph 10 should no longer be there, and that we should insist that Nigeria is a multi-religious state. In my opinion that would only compound the problem! The example and the experience of other nations that have tried to practice the multi-religious model is not encouraging at all. You would have to determine which religions are to be given official status and what amount of support would each have to enjoy. Within the Nigerian context you can imagine what a great confusion and controversy that will lead to. It is my strong conviction that the formulation of paragraph 10 is still the right one even though we may need to specify a bit more what it exactly entails.

### **The Sharia in the Nigerian Constitution:**

Finally, we can now come to the main point of our paper and here we need to go back a bit into history. We know from history that part of what is now Nigeria used to be under a well organised Islamic state which some people call the Sokoto Caliphate.<sup>7</sup> We have been informed that in that polity the Sharia was the official law of the state

and this was so until the colonial regime. We also know that the British colonial regime under the system of Indirect Rule tried not to interfere unduly with the internal rules and regulations of the peoples that accepted its allegiance. Thus not only were the traditional rulers left on their thrones; their laws and customs were also to be protected. The treaties and agreements between the British Colonial government and the rulers of the pre-colonial Sokoto caliphate clearly stipulated that the religion and the customs of the people would be respected. This principle was enforced not only among the Islamic communities in the north but also among the communities in the South run according to native law and custom. This is part and parcel of the grand compromise which characterised the British Colonial administration in Nigeria.

Matters became problematic as Nigeria entered an independent era and especially when the first efforts were being made to draft a constitution that would be based on the wishes of the people. The first of such occasion came when the Obasanjo military regime was about to hand over to the civilian government of the second republic. The great constitutional debate of 1978 witnessed a lot of discussion on many issues of our Nigerian constitution and the position of the Sharia was a major bone of contention.<sup>8</sup> The dispute was not whether the Sharia should feature in the constitution. The Draft Constitution, taking note of the existing situation did make provisions for the Sharia. The debate was more on the extent and scope of the Sharia in the constitution. The supporters of the Sharia, defending the proposal in the Draft Constitution, Chapter VII, wanted it to be a parallel law to the laws of the land with jurisdictions right up to the Supreme Court level. Others, mainly Christians, felt that there should be just one law in the nation and that the Sharia should have the status which the draft constitution also allowed for the native law and customs courts. In between these two positions, the great debate disorganised and almost stalled the proceedings of the conference. It is said that Alhaji Shehu Shagari led the group of 83 members that walked out of the constitutional conference on this matter. Eventually in a typical Nigerian way, a compromise was arrived at, which allowed the



conference to continue its work. That compromise is what we have in art 223 and 240 of the 1979 constitution, whereby Sharia courts of appeal were allowed in the state that already had them or wanted them and provisions made for the Supreme Court to have legal officers versed in the Sharia law to hear matters that come before the Supreme Court, from the Sharia Courts of appeal. It was a compromise that did not fully satisfy any side.

What is clear is that the 1979 constitution certainly did not envisage the government of the Federation or of any state totally embracing Sharia as the law of the land. During the Babangida regime, some modifications seem to have been attempted on this matter with the purpose of extending the jurisdiction of the Sharia. A lot of objections were raised at that time. All that is now history. The constitutional conference set up by the Abacha regime came out with a document that has never seen the light of day. What we are now carrying around, as the Abdulsalami 1999 constitution, is hardly what could be considered as the constitution made by Nigerians. It seems clear to me that the whole issue of the constitution of Nigeria still leaves a lot of room for further discussion and clarification.

We already hear a lot of dissatisfaction over issues like revenue allocation, the regionalization of the police and the armed forces, the autonomy of the state, etc. The Sharia is only one of such issues. All our constitutions referred to above, have been drafted and promulgated under a military regime to be used by a civilian administration. It is about time that under a proper civilian administration Nigerians have the time and opportunity to review all these legal instruments so as to come to agreement on the guidelines for the life of the nation as a modern democratic country. This is probably what some people are aiming at when they call for a **sovereign national conference**. Whatever name you give it, it seems it is about time a representative and authoritative group of Nigerians should assume the responsibility of fashioning out for the nation a constitution that will also be approved and promulgated for the people of Nigeria by the people of Nigeria as a whole. This is the challenge that still lies before us. The activities of the constitution review

commission will remain an important one even afterwards. But for the moment the scope of work that needs to be done can hardly be carried out by a group of experts in any review commission. It seems a major revision, perhaps a new constitution, is called for. It is within that kind of general review that the issues of Sharia will find their proper and final solution. The present debate would be a step towards arriving at a consensus on this issue.

### **Some Specific Issues:**

While the debate goes on, there are a few specific issues that I wish to draw our attention to.

*First*, there seems to be indeed a **contradiction** and not just a compromise in the position of the Sharia in the constitution of Nigeria today. It seems more and more clear that the position given to the Sharia even in the 1979 constitution runs contrary to paragraph ten of the same constitution which insists that no government whether federal or state shall adopt any religion as state religion. Even some Muslim religious thinkers and experts have told us clearly that it is only within an Islamic state that the Sharia can function fully. It means therefore that the nation still has a major decision to take in this regard. To retain Sharia while at the same time claiming that there is no official state religion is becoming more and more clearly a contradiction. How do we resolve this contradiction? That is the question before us. It is important to know too that the vast Christian population of Nigeria have made it clear that they do not intend to live under an Islamic state. Nor is it obvious that all Nigerian Muslims want such an Islamic state. We have reached the stage now where we can no longer continue to pretend that we can live comfortably with this clear contradiction. I wish to remark here that way back in 1985, speaking to an audience of Muslims intellectuals at the University of Ibadan, I noted as follows: "It appears that this compromise only established a truce, not a lasting peace. The struggle for a consensus continues." Events today seem to be proving me right!

*Second*, is it possible to have **one nation with many laws**? That too is a major issue that we must face squarely and honestly. It would

seem to me that if we want a nation that is one and indivisible as our constitution states in the very first opening lines, and we are not paying lip service to our constant desire for a united country under God, we would need to look seriously at ensuring that the laws that govern our nation in every square inch of the national territory should be the same for all. Any moves that tend to create different laws for different categories of Nigerians seems to me clearly running against the desire for a united country. There is already evidence of this in the reactions that we have been seeing in our country in the recent few months.

What about the advice that Christians should rather agitate for their own Christian laws to be integrated into the constitution of the country. There are some Christians too who have threatened that they would insist on some form of Christian law to run side by side with the Sharia law.<sup>9</sup> In my opinion whatever the good intentions of those who make such suggestion, I find it a problematic one to implement. It will mean a more complex arrangement than just Christians and Muslims. Definitely within the Christian fold, we have a wide range of differences when it comes to the laws of the churches. The Canon law of the Catholic Church does not bind any other Christian group. How many such laws and legal framework are we going to put up for recognition and how will they be implemented and worked out in practice?

*Third*, the moment the Sharia goes beyond personal law into **areas of criminal justice**, great problems begin to be created with regard to enforcement of laws. It seems to me obvious that this matter requires much more serious thinking. Other nations with varieties of religions and religious persuasions have arrived at the conclusion which we have so far upheld. This is to work out a constitutional and legal arrangement which does justice to everybody leaving people free to practice their religion within the ambit of private jurisdiction while the state takes care of what concerns everyone. This seems to me not just the best but the only way out for us in this country. This arrangement is based on two principles namely:

- a. That the laws of the land shall not command anything

- which the religions of the people forbids; and
- b. The laws of the land will not forbid anything which the religious laws of the people commands.

Outside of this there should be due freedom for people to live their lives as they think fit, with necessary regard for good order. It means too that the laws of the land are not obliged to forbid everything that a particular religion forbids or to command everything that a particular religion commands. Within that framework anyone can practice his religion freely provided the law does not hinder him. It is along these lines that I believe a workable system can be installed in the country.

*Finally*, there is **the issue of freedom**. This to me is very important. Our constitution stresses what are generally considered basic freedoms in the introduction to that document: freedom of movement, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom to uphold whatever religion one likes, freedom to propagate one's religion, freedom to change one's religion and also freedom even to claim to have no religion.<sup>10</sup> We must uphold all these freedoms if we mean to live in a country that has any reputation in the world that we live in today.

But freedom is important not only because of the demands of modern life. It seems to me that this is what God himself has decided. God has created us with freedom and he intends that this freedom be respected even by the state. It would have been easy for God to create us in such a way that we are incapable of breaking his rules. He himself took the risk of giving us the freedom which allows us to work against his will. What God has permitted let no man claim to remove even in the name of the same God. The Church to which I belong vigorously defends all these and other basic human freedoms. This, in my opinion, is the basic argument against any effort to enforce religious laws through the external and physical force of government apparatus.

This is all the more unacceptable if one is subjected by force to a law deriving from a religion which one has not freely adhered to. Despite all declarations and assurances that the Sharia does not affect non-Muslims, the reality on the ground proves the contrary. For example,

in Zamfara state, the new regulations that we are hearing about are not directed to only the Muslim citizens. They are meant to cover everybody. Who will uphold and defend the right of the Nigerian citizen in such a state not to be subjected to a law that infringes on his rights and freedoms under the Nigerian constitution?

### **Perspectives:**

After all these issues have been outlined, we could ask then the question, what are the perspectives for the future? What are our prospects, where are we going to? And in this regard I will simply make a few remarks.

- First, Nigeria has **a destiny to be a great nation**. We certainly have all it takes to be truly the leaders of the African continent. We are also the greatest black nation in the world. It means that we have a leading role to play. A nation that aspires to greatness cannot be always looking backward. We have to look forward, open up fresh vistas, instead of being trapped in our past history. I believe this has to inform our discussions and our decisions on the issue of the Sharia in Nigeria. It is not enough to tell us how wonderful it was in the days of the caliphate, if indeed there was ever any such golden age. It is more important rather to look at the Nigeria that we have today, in the world that we are living today, and plot a course that we can all jointly walk together, hand in hand, to make the nation great.
- Second observation, we want to insist that **religion has an irreplaceable role to play in ensuring public morality**. It is true that some nations have managed to achieve an appreciable level of discipline in public life without religion. But history shows that such is possible only at the great price of curtailing basic freedoms. It is only religion that can truly mould the mind and the heart to behave well. This is why any nation that is interested in a disciplined society within the context of freedom and respect of human right must do everything to encourage the contribution of religion in this matter. It is

therefore good when the government makes it possible for religious organizations to play their roles not only in terms of worship in public and private but also in terms of such key areas as the education of the youth and the mobilisation of citizens for good purposes in the society.

Third observation, human laws will always be open to improvement. We shall never have a perfect constitution. That is why the role of the constitution review commission will always remain valid. But even as of now as far as our efforts to improve the moral standard of our country is concerned, we need to look more at **the problem of implementation**. There are already adequate provisions in the laws of our land to take care of the more common anti-social behaviours like stealing, violence, murder, sexual irresponsibility, drunkenness to mention only a few. The problem is not that the laws are not there. The problem is that the laws are not only being infringed upon but that people are getting away with blatant disregard of the law. It is all the more serious when those who are supposed to uphold the law are also the ones who are bypassing it. Those who make the laws and those who enforce it must be seen first and foremost to be good observers of the law. I personally believe that this is where our problem is, a problem that I believe even the Sharia will have to contend with.

Finally as regards the legal system, we should be able to have a way of integrating into the law of the land whatever is best from all our different legal sources both traditional and religious. I think there is a legal review commission in the country and their job ought to be precisely to seek ways and means of **improving the laws of the nation**, taking into consideration the resources that are available within our own communities. In that way, whatever is good and valid, even within the Sharia system, could be brought in to the same legal framework of the country, just as other religions too could bring in their own contribution. As it is, the Nigerian law

already contains much of such elements. The process should continue.

### **Conclusion:**

As I come to the end of these rather random thoughts, I would like to conclude on a few clear notes. The effort and aim of this paper is to demonstrate why many of us **Nigerians say “NO”** to the trend that started recently of extending the scope of Sharia to the extent of making it into state laws.

If we say “no” to Sharia, it is **not out of ignorance**, as some people seem to suggest. We do know what the Sharia is all about, especially as it affects Christians who find themselves under its influence. Although it is good and useful to have this kind of seminars, it would be futile for anyone to hope that after many seminars and workshops, after a lot of explanations, Christians will finally settle for and agree to the Sharia. Indeed, when they say “NO”, it is a position taken out of full knowledge and often bitter experience of the implications on the Christian.

Incidentally, though some people try to tell us that Christians have adequate protection under the Sharia law, I beg to remark that it is Christians who should say whether they have adequate protection under the Sharia law. It is they who wear the shoes who know where it pinches. I know many Christians who live in Islamic states and I can tell you all here that they are by no means happy with the so-called “protection” that they are supposed to be enjoying.<sup>11</sup>

When we say no to Sharia, it is **not out of opposition** to, less still hatred for Islam. We respect Islam and we expect the followers of Islam to have the full freedom to organise their lives according to the dictates of their religion. Similarly, we too expect to have the scope and the freedom to organise our lives in consonance with the injunctions of our faith. Rather, if we say “no” to Sharia, it is because we see that the good of our nation demands that the laws of our land should be equal for all. We see this as the only way to ensure a future that is strife-free and promote the free and happy collaboration of all citizens in the task of nation building.

We want also to observe that **we say “YES” to greater effort to improve public morality.** No one is satisfied with what we see around us. We are talking not only of little thieves and hungry pilferers, who are more likely to have their hands chopped off. We are talking also and especially of the big thieves in high places who steal and loot in billions of Naira, without ever facing trial in any court. Most of these VIP brigands and bandits often appear very devout in whatever religion they claim to practice. Therefore, there is a need for a better application of the laws that exist and to apply them equally to all, without sacred cows. There is also a need for an ongoing fine-tuning of our legal system, enriching it with suitable items from all appropriate sources.

Finally we hope that we shall soon be able to **put this debate behind us.** There is so much work to be done, to rebuild and renew our nation. We cannot afford to allow ourselves to be diverted in our commitment. We want to be able to put all our energies together on this common journey to make Nigeria a great nation. As I earlier said, government should be more forthcoming with words and deeds that will refocus the citizens away from sterile debates and controversies. If we continue indefinitely dispersing our energies in this kind of debate we would not even see clearly enough to be able to face the great task of cleaning up our public life system. Meanwhile the same rogues will also hide behind these debates to continue to perpetuate their crimes against the nation. I will not be surprised if many of the frontline fighters for or against this issue are also among the most corrupt people in the nation. We pray that God will permit us to see more clearly where we are going, bring us together as citizens of the same nation, with common aims of living in peace and harmony under God.

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<sup>1</sup> A Paper delivered at the National Seminar on Sharia (Organised By Jama'atu Nasril Islam) – Arewa House Main Auditorium, Kaduna, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2000.

<sup>2</sup> For a full text of this paper, see John Onaiyekan “The Sharia in Nigeria: A Christian View” in *BICMURA*, July 1987, pp. 1-17.



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<sup>3</sup> The *Sunday Punch* of November 7, 1999 published the full text of "The Sharia Law of Zamfara" - *for the Records*.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the place of Nigeria in forging new forms of Muslim-Christian relationship worldwide, see John Onaiyekan "Being Church in an Islamo-Christian Society: Emerging Patterns of Christian/Muslim Relations in Africa - A Nigerian Perspective" *Concilium* 1992/1, pp 44-52.

<sup>5</sup> I have a fuller discussion on the secularity of the state in John Onaiyekan "State Secularity and the Nigerian Christian" in *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*, Vol. 2/1: April 1989, pp.75-83

<sup>6</sup> I have discussed many of these issues of government involvement in religion in John Onaiyekan "Christians and Muslims: human rights and responsibilities. The Nigerian Situation". in *Islamochristiana*, Rome 1983, vol. 9. pp. 181-199.

<sup>7</sup> For a classical treatments of the "Sokoto Caliphate" ref. M. Last *The Sokoto Caliphate*, London, 1967. See also S. Shagari and J. Boyd, *Uthman dan Fodio*, Lagos, 1978

<sup>8</sup> For more on the debate on the Sharia at the 1978 Constitutional Conference, see Onaiyekan *The Sharia in Nigeria: a Christian Perspective*.

<sup>9</sup> In the heat of the Sharia debate in 1977, Rev. Adegbola from Ibadan made a passionate case for state financed "Canon Law Courts" for Christians on the basis of equality. See. E.A.A. Adegbola, *Equal Deal for all Religious Groups* in W. Ofonagoro, *The Great Debate*, Lagos, 1978, p. 374ff

<sup>10</sup> These basic freedoms are clearly stipulated in Chap. IV of the 1979 Constitution, art. 30-42.

<sup>11</sup> For a realistic Christian view of the condition of non-Muslims in an Islamic State, see A. Fatall, *Le Statut légal des non-mulmans en pays d'Islam*, Beyruth, 1958, as well as J. Kenny, *Sharia in Nigeria* in *Bicmura*, January 1986, p. 10-17

## Rediscovering the Agency of Africans – Emerging Paradigms of African Theology<sup>1</sup>

By

Tinyiko Sam Maluleke

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Context

Theology is biographical and contextual. I am deeply influenced by the South African context out of which I come. The twenty-year era (1980 - 2000) during which I have learnt and taught theology has been one of change and transition. It is an era in which the demise of Apartheid was accelerated, culminating in the installation of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first democratically elected president to head the first democratically elected government in the country's history. But we cannot forget that it was also the most repressive and most gruesome era in the history of our country. Therefore, I bear in my soul and psyche, the scars of the repression that swept South Africa from 1976 (when I was secondary school student in SOWETO) through to the violent darkness of the mid-eighties and early 1990s. For this reason I have been deeply influenced by the passion and critical edge of South African Black Theology. But I am also tremendously influenced by and respectful of the scholarship and the Christian 'Africanism' of the likes of John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu. The sharp and satirical tongue of Uganda's Okot p'Bitek in his 'songs' and essays touches my very gut – as does the articulation of African identity; its crisis, its tragedy, its incompleteness and its dreams encapsulated in the works of the likes of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, N'gugi wa Thiongo, Ayi Kwei Armah, Eskia Mphahlele, Can Themba, Alex Laguma and others. But I am also curious about the self-definition of 'White African' writers, such as J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer and others.

I write as an Anglophone Protestant from a largely Anglophone Protestant country. I speak from the new South Africa – one of the

world's youngest democracies. I speak as a theologian who is keen to understand and possibly help fashion out a role for Christian theology in the new South Africa and the “new” Africa. I am specifically interested in the possible role of theology in interpreting and enhancing the agency of Africans in the light of cultural, religious and economic marginalization. After the euphoria of the end of Apartheid, it would be accurate to say that South African theology and South African Ecumenism is in some kind of recess if not a kind of disarray. Without being too presumptuous, it is fair to say that up until the early 1990s, South Africa has been one of the most theologically prolific places in the world – producing some of the best as well as the worst packages of Christian theology this side of the Second World War, outside of Germany.

Perhaps the apex of this creativity was the publication of the Kairos Document in 1985. But even the Kairos Document fails dismally to capture all of the theological creativity that emanated out of that country. It is therefore not difficult to unmask both the fatigue in ecumenical South African theology as well as the thousand-and-one excuses and lamentations offered for this state of affairs. As a relatively young (since I am still under 40) theologian I miss the theological rhetoric of Allan Boesak in my country. I miss the defiant, passionate and humorous ‘image of God’ theology of Tutu – who has now been co-opted into a judicial state apparatus called the Truth Commission. There is a huge gaping hole that has been left by my esteemed mentors and colleagues, Itumeleng Mosala, Takatso Mofokeng, Simon Maimela, Smangalisio Mkhatswa, Frank Chikane etc, all of whom have “gone secular” become all manner of administrators and state functionaries. My hope is that the fatigue and the disarray in theology is a temporary one and that – continentally speaking – it is strictly confined only to South Africa!

### **1.2 The task of this Essay**

Fortunately, there are a few bold attempts, both inside and outside South Africa, at responding to the ‘new’ situation. As already hinted above, my aim in this essay is to explore the possible role of theology in interpreting and enhancing the agency of Africans in the light of

cultural, religious and economic marginalization. My reading of some recent developments in African Theology has persuaded me that theology has a unique role to play in (a) acknowledging, (b) valorising, (c) interpreting and (d) enhancing the agency of African Christians in their daily struggles against the cultural, religious and economic forces of death which seek to marginalize them. However, it is a task in which African Theology cannot partake unless it undertakes serious methodological changes. What are the theoretical and methodological tools necessary for African Theology to carry out the task that I have outlined above? As hinted above, I believe that the basic clues and the fiduciary indicators as to how we might answer this question are already provided in the emerging new paradigm of African Theology in the post-cold war era.

## **2. Old and New Paradigms**

### **2.1 The Old**

A few years ago, I wrote a popular article in the form of a letter addressed to Job of the Bible, under the fictitious name of a woman called Africa (Maluleke, 1997). In this letter Lady Africa likens her circumstances and her fate to that of Job. Having lost everything she once had, Africa now sits on a rubbish dump outside the city gates. Africa has been victimized and raped by explorers, slave traders, colonialists and dictators born out of her own womb. Like Job, Africa is religious – ‘notoriously religious’ as Mbiti once put it. In many African countries one is struck by the extent and public display of religious symbolism. Yet in her letter to Job, Africa wonders aloud whether her religiosity is not in fact part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Where is the hand of God in the story of Africa, she wonders? What are the fruits of her religiosity? Poverty? Underdevelopment and exploitation? “How can we explain that (one of) the most religious continents in the world is also the poorest”? – asks one of Africa’s sons, Jesse Mugambi (1995). Therefore Africa wonders how Job can praise God for taking away everything and how Job can ‘explain it all away’ by declaring “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” [Job

1:21] Although Africa's letter to Job takes the post-cold war situation of Africa into account, it is still framed in terms of old and established frameworks of African theologising. The overwhelming picture is one of Africa as a victim – hard done by one and all. Cold-war era African Theology whether it be 'inculturational' or 'liberational' proceeded out of the recognition of Africa's massive victimization and exploitation.

### **2.1.1 The Metaphor of Liberation**

From the point of view of Southern Africa there is widespread agreement that the Kairos Document (1985) – its shortcomings notwithstanding – represented a notable highpoint in local theologies of liberation – if not in its theological content definitely in its timing, prophetic edge and the process out of which it was born. What were the basic presuppositions of such cold-war African theologising? Quoting from the final statement of one EATWOT meeting, Per Frostin (1988) suggests five factors as representative of liberation theology paradigm in African Theology: (a) the poor as the primary epistemological interlocutors for African theology; (b) pursuit not of the question 'does God exist?' but rather of the question 'why does God allow idolatry, blatant blasphemy and oppression?'; (c) the understanding of human reality as conflictual; (d) commitment to an analysis of 'what is going on, on the ground' by 'reading the signs of the times' and the consequent reliance on social sciences rather than on philosophy as has been traditionally the case for theology, (e) the insistence that theology begins at sunset and that commitment is the first act in theology – a notion clearly borrowed from Latin American Theology. Two other crosscurrents of African Theology closely related to the foregoing are South African Black Theology and African Women's Theology. In these two theologies the notion of "the poor" is broken down to mean "women" and "blacks" so that there is a more deliberate emphasis on gender and race. Yet perhaps the most enduring contribution of Black Theology to African Theology is not in its privileging of race as a socio-theological tool, but its biblical hermeneutics.

### 2.1.2 The Inculturation Metaphor

The so-called African Theology of Liberation was only one current of African Theology, there were others. There was the so-called inculturation current whose precursors and inspirations were the likes of Placide Tempels (1959) *La Philosophie Bantoe* (first published in 1945<sup>2</sup>), Griaule's (1966)<sup>3</sup> *Dieu d'eau: Entretiens avec Ogotemmêli* as well as the kinds of early socio-anthropological studies of African religions done by Evans-Pritchard and others. Indeed the first generation of self-conscious and written African Theology during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was deeply influenced by these works. For this generation of theologians nothing was more important than the quest for a coherent African religious identity which would account for the African past as well as the African present. Adrian Hastings (1976:52-53) noted during this period that "the African theologian finds that the chief non-biblical reality with which he must struggle is the non-Christian religious tradition of his own people, and African theology in its present stage is shaping as something of a dialogue between the African Christian scholar and the perennial religions and spiritualities of Africa". Fasholé-Luke (1975:267-268) explained the task of this generation of theologians in this way:

... the quest for African Christian theologies which has been vigorously pursued in the last decade, amounts to attempting to make clear the fact that conversion to Christianity must be coupled with cultural continuity. Furthermore, if Christianity is to change its status from that of resident alien to that of citizen, then it must become incarnate in the life and thought of Africa and its theologies must bear the distinctive stamp of mature African thinking and reflection. What African theologians have been endeavouring to do is to draw together the various and disparate sources which make up the total religious experience of Christians in Africa into a coherent and meaningful pattern.

At its most radical – and consequently its most ambiguous – this current was represented in the utterances and writings of the likes of John Gatu, Samuel Kibicho, Christian Gabba and Gabriel Setiloane.

## **2.2 The New**

In the fictitious letter of Africa to Job referred to above, Africa notes with a touch of ironic nostalgia that she was once needed even though she was needed only for what could be taken from her. There was once a scramble for Africa! Africa was once 'valued' however warped the motivations and values of those who wished to have her. Now Africa wonders if she is still of much use even to her erstwhile exploiters and admirers, as she sits on the world's rubbish dump. Those who were scrambling for Africa such as the states of Europe are now organising themselves into such powerful economic blocs as the European Community. The end of the cold-war has created new priorities for Europe and America and Africa does not appear to be one of them. The internal decay within Africa itself has led to what some have termed "Afro-pessimism". Indeed Africa's letter to Job is desperate and pessimistic.

Even the Africans in the Diaspora who once invested their hopes and energies to "Mother Africa" – dating back to Crummell, Du Bois, Blyden and others – appear now to have a weakened resolve. An African American, a journalist for the influential New York Times based in Nairobi in order to report on, amongst other things, the Rwandan genocide, was so horrified by the barbarities committed there so that he wrote a book in which he thanked God that his ancestors were made slaves and taken out of Africa (Richburg 1997). We cannot forget that the same week when South Africa and the world joyfully inaugurated Mandela as the first president of a democratic country, genocide was taking place in Rwanda. Thus, it has been said that while the old is dying in Africa, the new has not yet been born either. Clearly, the demise of the cold war and the emergence of the new world order signified as it is by the notion of globalisation brings no automatic blessings for African countries. It will take more than the 'African renaissance'<sup>4</sup> rhetoric (in South Africa and Uganda) to get out of the rut of centuries of exploitation and the more recent ravages of neo-colonialism, dictatorship and internal decay. Even the end of Apartheid is not automatically positive for the poorest of the poor. If anything, the end of Apartheid may have inadvertently wrested the initiative from the poor and their

representatives – which might be why we have theological confusion in South Africa today.

It also appears that our inherited frameworks, theological methods and metaphors are increasingly being seen as inadequate if not expired. Africa finds herself in a ‘new place’ and its thinkers and leaders are desperately looking for a new language and new frameworks. The African poor are pouring scorn at ‘liberation-rhetoric’ regardless of the quarters from where it emanates because long after independence they remain poor if not poorer – that is if they have not been killed off by disease or the guns of the more powerful. African women are mobilizing without and despite African men (in fact they are seeking alliances with other women from all over the world and from all walks of life). Note the simmering anger and the implied call for decisive sisterly action in the following quote:

....the women of Africa, are expected simply to look on, to keep the peace; they are not to seek heroic actions and/or learn self-defence, for the lions and the wild hogs and the hyenas that threaten the communal life are their own brothers. [They] ...are expected to be supportive and to hide from outsiders, the festering wounds. They are supposed to be the custodians of all the ancient arts and keepers of the secret that numb pains inflicted by internal aggressors. They are to pray and sing and carry. They are to tend the wounds from battles in which they are not allowed to fight. They are only permitted to look on from afar, “for their own good”. So they stand by, shaking loosened wrists in desperation, powerlessly watching their brothers flounder (Oduyoye 1995:10)

In a sense, Africa – the geographical entity, Africa the ‘idea’ as well as the ‘idea’ of an African nation-state are all daily imploded into our stupefied and puzzled faces. The Ghanaian philosopher, Kwame Appiah (1992) scoffs at all notions of a united, homogeneous Africa, African identity and what he calls racialist Pan Africanism – declaring that Africa is like “my father’s house in which there are many mansions”, meaning that there are many and various ways of being African!



### 3. Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans

I want to suggest however that while the view of Africa painted in the fictitious letter I recount above is real, current and valid, this reality does not exhaust all the faces of Africa. In the midst of all this tragedy, ordinary Africans are surviving. In countless African villages in remote areas un-reached and ignored by government – people find ways and means to survive. In countries without infrastructure, without effective government and with the lowest GDP imaginable Africans are surviving. Despite the heavy assault of certain destructive versions of American culture, urbanised Africans are fashioning out their own ways of being. By diverse means ordinary Africans are finding ways to neutralize the stifling ‘hands’ of globalisation and IMF policies. This view of Africa is informed by a slightly different gaze at Africa – it is a gaze from within and a gaze that zooms on Africa’s creative, innovative and *agentic* spirit. Such a gaze must not however be seen to replace and disprove other gazes on Africa – a fatal mistake committed by so many optimistic *Africanists* (as opposed to so-called Afro-pessimists). Africans are, have and continue to be victimized from within and from without. There is no denying that.

The gaze I propose is therefore not based on some simplistic positive-thinking philosophy such as is often promoted by conservative behaviourists who glibly suggest that Africans would succeed if they tried harder, believed more fervently and thought more positively. The reality of the African situation is far more complex and far more grinding than the diagnosis implied in simplistic positive-thinking philosophy. In the view of Cornel West (1993:14) such ‘conservative behaviourists’ flippantly

...tell black people to see themselves as agents, not victims. And on the surface, this is comforting advice, a nice cliché for downtrodden people. But inspirational slogans cannot substitute for substantive historical and social analysis. While Black people have never been simply victims, wallowing in self-pity and begging for white give-aways, they have been -- and are -- victimised. Therefore to call on Black people to be agents makes sense only if we also

examine the dynamics of the victimisation against which their agency will, in part, be exercised.

It is therefore important that my call for a slightly different gaze on Africa be understood in terms that differ radically from those stemming from conservative behaviourism. Indeed my call is not a call for an artificial reorientation of attitudes towards and about Africa, Africans and Africanness. I invite my readers to join me in observing, analysing and interpreting some of the tactics and strategies of Africa's indomitable spirit (cf. Mbembe 1988). I am not calling for an artificial conjuring up of a positive attitude towards Africa in the facile hope that such a positive attitude will magically produce a triumphant Africa.

My reading of the situation takes its cue from some recent developments in African Theology. On the basis of these I suggest that we are being called to a humble but careful observance of the struggles of Africans to be agents against great odds, not by ignoring or discounting the odds, but by confronting them. Africans have always been agents, never 'simply victims, wallowing in self-pity'; they have always exercised their agency in struggles for survival and integrity. However, their agency has not always been recognized let alone nurtured. Speaking from a South African perspective, my sense is that there is a new wave of awareness of the agency of ordinary marginalized Africans. In fact, at their best and most creative, African theologies have always proceeded on some gut-feeling and almost stubborn insistence that Africans were agents and no mere door-mats trampled upon by civilisers, missionaries and colonialists.

### **3.1 An outline of emerging Paradigm**

How would we characterize the emerging paradigm of post-cold war African Theology? I suggest eight factors that need to be taken into account in trying to understand what I consider to be the most creative aspects of the emerging paradigm of African theology.

*Firstly*, many of the basic assumptions of cold-war African theology continue to be basic to many of the new proposals for African theologising – admittedly to various degrees. It is important that we

recognize that post cold-war African theologies are continuous with previous African theologies even if and when their proponents espouse and proclaim a radical discontinuity. African Theology cannot and will not abdicate the gains made – and ambiguities inherited – during the past fifty odd years. A careful reading of Villa Vicencio (1992) reveals that although he genuinely proposes a new metaphor for theology and a slightly different orientation he is methodologically still beholden to the liberation paradigm. Ironically, Mugambi's 'take' on reconstruction (at least in his 1995 work) is methodologically still beholden to the inculturation paradigm, Robin Petersen's (1995) otherwise ground-breaking and allegedly 'different' study of African Independent Churches [AICs] turns out to be largely a pursuit of such familiar categories of classical ecumenical theology as domination, resistance and Kairos. In many ways the works of Kwame Bediako and Lamin Sanneh offer a sophisticated continuation of West (and East?) African inculturation theology.

*Secondly*, in post cold-war African theology, we have seen attempts at constructing a less embittered and less schizophrenic relationship between Africa and Christianity on the one hand and between Africans and their painful Christian past on the other. Two examples of theological approaches that pursue one or the other (or both) of these twin tasks spring to mind. The first example is represented in the works of Kwame Bediako and Lamin Sanneh – the 'translation theology' school (see my previous works on this). Bediako's proposal, built on the works of Walls and Sanneh is that Christianity is not intrinsically and irredeemably foreign to Africa, anymore than it is intrinsically and irredeemably Western. The clue to understanding the 'true nature' of the Christian faith is in its translatability – a notion expounded by Lamin Sanneh over a decade. Therefore, it is not what the missionaries or colonialists did or did not do, wished or did not wish that accounts for the massive presence of Christianity on the continent, but the logic of its translatability which necessarily enlists the agency of local (read African) Christians enabling them to truly own the faith. In similar fashion Walls (1996) boldly suggests that African Christianity is legitimately 'an African religion' which represents simultaneously a new chapter in the histories of both

Christianity and African religion. Therefore being African is not in opposition to being Christian and vice versa – this assumption must be abandoned as a fundamental starting point for African Theology, the likes of Bediako and Walls suggest. The second example of an attempt to construct a less embittered and less schizophrenic relationship with the painful ‘Christian’ past is represented by what I will tentatively call ‘Desmond Tutu’s theology of humanity and forgiveness’ – most eloquently articulated in his *No future without Forgiveness*. Here, Christian forgiveness and the African spirit of Ubuntu are put forward as theological resources for dealing with and overcoming the painful past of dehumanisation and oppression in the name of (Christian) religion. In this way Black Christians can and need not only remain Christian but also they may, for their own sakes and for the sakes of others, forgive and embrace those who oppressed, dehumanised and ‘killed’ them<sup>5</sup>. But there is a striking difference between Tutu’s quest for a less embittered basis for doing African Theology and that which is advanced by Bediako, Sanneh and Walls. Tutu confronts the pain of ‘Christian’ complicity in oppression head on while the others do not.

*Third*, there is a conscious and deliberate attempt to supplement and even substitute worn-out metaphors and starting points fashioned out of the cold-war era. The past decade has seen the introduction of such metaphors as reconstruction and translation. There is a palpable hunger and search for a new paradigm that will enable African Theology to ‘speak’ to the local situation. For example, the notion of reconstruction as a new metaphor around which African Theology could be done has been taken up by the likes of Jesse Mugambi (1995), Charles Villa-Vicencio (1992) of South Africa and Kā Mana of the Democratic Republic of Congo in francophone Africa. Mugambi proposes an end to the well-rehearsed debate between ‘inculturation’ and ‘liberation’ by suggesting that both have expired. He substitutes both by the notion of ‘reconstruction’. Similarly, Villa-Vicencio suggests that liberation theology’s commitment to solidarity with the poor may be supplemented by what he calls a ‘critical solidarity’ with a democratic state where and in so far as such a state seeks to address the concerns of the poor.

*Fourth*, post-cold war African theology intends to be critical of the

‘fraudulent project of the post-colonial nationalist bourgeoisie’ (Mosala in Katongole 1998) – something that the likes of Jean-Marc Ela and the late Engelbert Mveng have already been bringing to the fore in the 1980s. Let me quickly add that this is proving quite difficult in many African states – South Africa included – perhaps because it is extremely dangerous to criticize post-colonial African governments. In South Africa, it is simply very difficult to be critical of anything that has the support of Mandela and Tutu. But the task of being prophetic in post-independent Africa is one that has been acknowledged as a necessary one.

*Fifth*, there is a growing criticism of the grand narratives of Africa, African culture and the political liberation projects. Not only is African culture being found to be extremely various, but African women theologians are, for example, mounting a fundamental critique of it. As indicated above the notion of Africa or African states as homogeneous and liberative is now being imploded in various disciplines.

*Sixth*, whereas cold-war African theology granted epistemological privilege to the poor (Blacks or women) in ways that portrayed the poor as conned and helpless victims needing to be roused from their slumber, post cold-war African Theology is cautious about portraying the African poor as helpless and successfully brain-washed victims of the powers that be. There is a new realization that the African poor, African Christians and Africans in general are not without resources, intellectual, material and spiritual resources for survival and resistance. In other words the agency of African Christians and the African poor is being rediscovered, explored and respectfully interpreted.

*Seventh*, I wish to suggest that African women are arguably the one section of most African societies which is engaging in the most passionate, the most vibrant and the most prophetic forms of praxis (theory and practice). African Women’s Theology has been by far the most prolific and challenging in the past decade and half – at least in Anglophone Protestant Africa.

*Lastly*, the one factor that cuts across all of the factors highlighted above is the rediscovery of the agency of Africans. All of the new proposals in African Theology, each in its own way, foreground the

**notion** Africans as agents. Admittedly, the protagonists are not always consciously and deliberately doing this. Nor are they all aware of the fact that they may be advancing similar and mutually supportive projects so that some even operate in ignorance of others. Yet a careful analysis of the newest offerings in African Theology – from the work of Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako, through that of Oduyoye and her sisters in the Circle of Concerned African Women theologians, Mugambi and Villa Vicencio's reconstruction theology, Mosala and Mofokeng's quest to understand how Black Christians may and do intend to 'use the Bible to get the land back and get the land back without losing the Bible', Tutu's theology of forgiveness, Gerald West's quest for creating dialogue between Africa's trained and Africa's ordinary readers, to Robin Petersen's riveting attempt to understand 'what really goes on' in African Independent Churches – reveal a rediscovery of the agency of African Christians in the face of great odds.

One of the salient moves that Lamin Sanneh makes in his theology is to wrest the creative initiative from missionaries to 'the Gospel' and consequently to its African translators and assimilators. It was and could only be Africans who translated the gospel into vernacular idiom and not the missionaries, he argues. Furthermore, Sanneh argues that Africans conducted and discharged the translation process in such a way as to strengthen their own identity and position in the world. For several years now, the renowned Zimbabwean AICs scholar, Marthinus Daneel has argued not only that the AICs represented the most contextualized and inculturated form of African Christianity, but that the total life, witness and praxis of these churches was so *agentic* that it constituted a form of theology. Therefore these churches constituted not merely the 'raw material' and the 'sources, as some had claimed, but that they themselves were a form of African theology and a face of African Christianity in their own right, Daneel has argued. In his work Robin Petersen presents a complex argument for viewing AIC members as agents or resisters.

In similar ways, the work of the circle of concerned women theologians highlights that women are not passive, brainwashed and duped members of African societies. They are resisting agents who are

taking the initiative. In his work, Gerald West shows that poor, uneducated, illiterate and/or untrained African readers of the Bible are not destitute. They provide their own intelligent, coherent, not only different but better readings of the Bible.

#### **4. Methodological ‘Wires’ of the Emerging Paradigm**

Methodologically, the most instructive have been the works of Robin Petersen - a South African prophetic theologian – on the relationship between what he calls prophetic African theology and AICs on the one hand, and those of Itumeleng Mosala (and Takatso Mofokeng) – operating from within South African Black Theology – in their quest for Black theological and Biblical hermeneutics as a means of understanding and constructively influencing the paradoxical – if not tragic – nature of Black Christianity on the other.

##### **4.1 Mosala and his legacy**

More than any other Black theologian, Itumeleng Mosala has laboured hardest to seek a liberative and truly independent hermeneutical framework. For Mosala (1989:21), liberative theology must be situated within and grow out of “the social, cultural, political and economic world of the black working class and peasantry”. It is this slant that has made his brief and frugal research on AICs unique and extremely valuable. For him, AICs are made up of ‘the poorest of the poor’ and they constitute “an autonomous cultural discourse under conditions of a monopoly capitalist system which is over-determined by a racist political and social structure” (1989b:14). But Mosala also recognizes that while AICs may provide “liberation from the brutalities of late capitalism” through their subversive hermeneutics of distortion and mystification, this is achieved at the cost of “ideological enslavement to the authoritarian structures of a feudal leadership with undoubted capitalist aspirations and activities”.

For him therefore, it is important that the domination of working class Blacks be understood comprehensively – as cultural, political and economic – and that the struggle against such domination be pitched consciously and deliberately at these levels. To articulate his notions of culture, race and class, Mosala creatively invokes certain types of

Marxian historical materialism – referring to the likes of Cabral, Cornel West and Terry Eagleton. He also suggests that while commitment to the liberation struggle is necessary it is not enough as a basis of liberative theology. This is, in my opinion a momentous suggestion. What is crucial is that theology must go beyond mere commitment to effecting an “ideological and theoretical break” (1989:4) with dominant ideologies, practices and discourses. Indeed the sharpest edge of Mosala’s tongue is reserved for those types of liberation theologies, who despite their genuinely good intentions, nevertheless remain trapped in the ideological and theoretical frameworks of the very oppressors whom they seek to undermine and ultimately dethrone – he has singled out several types of contextual theology for this kind of critique. Thus for Mosala, a thoroughgoing class analysis of society, the church and theologians is necessary. The other side of Mosala’s push for a hermeneutically and theoretically ‘liberated’ theology is his Biblical hermeneutics. He rejects the equation of the Bible with the Word of God as ultimately only a ruling class ploy to present themselves through the Bible as a self-interpreting single-message ‘voice of God’. He calls for a critical regard for the Bible and a commitment to exposing and exploring the ambiguities in its messages – in the service of the struggles of the poor working class Blacks. Mosala, (and Mofokeng) suggest that not all of the Bible is liberative – in fact he argues that most of it is not liberative – at least not automatically so. If ‘left to its devices’ the Bible will manufacture and re-enforce oppression – thus the need for a break with oppressive hermeneutics. In similar manner, Mosala was not satisfied to bless everything about the “Black experience”, Black culture or the praxis of AICs

#### **4.2 Re-conceptualisation of Dominance and Resistance:**

Next to the work of Mosala, Petersen’s PhD work on the relationship between South African Prophetic Theology and AICs – *Time, Resistance and Reconstruction: Rethinking Kairos Theory* – is one of the most important theological works to come out of post-apartheid South Africa (and perhaps in post-cold war Africa). I have suggested above that one of the most creative currents common to all



theological orientations in the emerging paradigm of post-cold war African Theology is the rediscovery of African agency. In this important work, Petersen seeks to (a) explain why and how prophetic liberation theology has never been able to ‘make its mind up’ about AICs (b) propose some methodological and theoretical strategies which can help prophetic theology evaluate AICs more creatively and more coherently and (c) thereby assist prophetic theology achieve an integration of its “ethical-political norm”<sup>6</sup> with an ability to analyse, understand and articulate the “socio-cultural” and the popular as represented in such groups as AICs – in other words to understand the *kairos* not merely and narrowly in overt political terms, but also in terms of disrupted *chronos* and the disrupting of *chronos* such as what happens in ritual praxis.

But Petersen goes further and explores what might be necessary for prophetic/liberation theology to achieve this integration. There is need to re-conceptualise – to re-conceptualise *kariotic* time, the political, domination, and resistance. Petersen charges that the largely enlightenment beholden tools – e.g. various forms and appropriations of Marxist analyses – of conventional liberation or prophetic theology are not adequate to achieve this task. He invokes “the theoretical resources that open up new possibilities for a ‘thicker’ description and analysis of ‘the social’, and for different conceptualizations of what counts as political, as resistance, as religious and as ethical” (Petersen 1995:12). To achieve these tasks, Petersen refers to the works of three scholars. Michel De Certeau (historian of religion and theorist of culture), James Scott (a sociologist) and Jean and John Comaroff (historical anthropologists). Other South African theologians have followed Petersen down this path – notably Gerald West (1999) and Jim Cochrane (1999), but they do not, in my opinion, achieve the kind of theoretical depth and command of issues at stake, that Petersen achieves.

#### 4.2.1 De Certeau

The basic aim of De Certeau’s (1984) book is to explore and demonstrate how, in the practices of everyday life, in the local networks of labour, recreation and anti-discipline, the ordinary person

resists domination in countless ways. Moving away from Marxist preoccupation with production of either material goods or representations, De Certeau seeks to analyse consumption. He argues that consumption is not a passive but highly creative and devious activity even though “it does not manifest itself through its own products but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order (De Certeau 1984: xii). De Certeau is aware of Michel Foucault’s post-modernist work which has sought to demonstrate microphysics of power, the capillaries of which insinuate themselves in multiple networks of domination by means of the all-pervasiveness of the disciplinary apparatuses of modernity. However, De Certeau’s (1984:xv) goal is to lay bare and

...to perceive and analyze the microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of ‘tactics’ articulated in the details of everyday life...the goal is not to make clearer how the violence of order is transmuted into disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light, the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical and makeshift creativity of groups and individuals already caught up in the nets of ‘discipline’.

It is important to note that De Certeau points out not only that the resistance of consumers is ‘clandestine, dispersed, tactical and makeshift’ but also that it largely follows “a logic of unself-conscious thought” (1984:xv). Another important dimension to De Certeau’s thought is the distinction he makes between ‘strategy’ and ‘tactic’. Strategy implies access to a ‘place’ from which planning can occur and operations can be mounted against exterior treats. Tactic, however, is a “calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” and proper space – it is the art of those without power.

#### **4.2.2 James Scott**

As the title of both his books<sup>7</sup> betray, Scott’s work is about domination and the arts of resistance – the ‘weapons of the weak’. The Comaroffs and Scott do not appear to be seriously aware of each

other's works – although Scott makes two brief illustrative and approving references to the work of Jean Comaroff on Zionists at Tshidi<sup>8</sup> Although their works are not synonymous in scope, let alone in orientation and approach there are potential points of affinity and comparison – a comparison which unfortunately falls outside the scope of this study.<sup>9</sup> If the Comaroffs are weary of an over-emphasis on political economy at the expense of culture and symbolism so that Black Africans are denied any historical dynamism and the danger of painting the actions of all colonizers with the same brush: Scott is weary of a deterministic understanding of the notions of the hegemony of ruling elites over their subordinates so that the latter are thoroughly incorporated into the hegemonic scheme of things through the cultivation and acceptance of a false consciousness. For Scott there is a different, creative, empirical and more reliable way of understanding the relationship between domination and resistance. A careful study of the arts of resistance among subordinate groups will ensure that “we are not reduced to waiting for open social protest to lift a veil of consent and quiescence. A view of politics focused either on what may be commanded performances of consent or open rebellion represents a far too narrow concept of political life – especially under conditions of tyranny or near-tyranny in which much of the world lives”<sup>10</sup>.

For Scott hegemony is no reliable barometer of domination and since hegemony is displayed and captured in the public sphere – which is the arena of the “encounter of the public transcript on the dominant with the public transcript of the subordinate”<sup>11</sup>. But, as the subtitle of his book reveals, there is a ‘hidden transcript’ – the sphere of *infrapolitics* – which is a key clue to what really takes place in situations of dominance and resistance. To gain new insights into resistance we have to go “behind the official story”<sup>12</sup> to the hidden transcript where we will observe, as Scott did among Malay peasant rice-farming labourers that: “rather than openly rebel or publicly protest, they adopted the safer course of anonymous attacks on property, poaching, character assassination, and shunning. They prudently avoided, with few exceptions, any irrevocable acts of public defiance”<sup>13</sup>. The word ‘prudent’ is key here. For according to Scott the dominated ‘know’ the extent or meaning of their domination and

they are consciously as well as prudently choosing to act in hidden transcript.

Therefore the hidden transcript is for the subordinate group a conscious, calculated and crafty ‘art of resistance’ – “a wide variety of low-profile forms of that dare not speak in their own name”. The public transcript is “the self-portrait of dominant élites as they would have themselves seen”<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, we must be wary of reading too much into acts of deference expected and ‘required’ of subordinates in highly stratified societies. However, even such acts whether they be in word or in gesture, must not be seen “merely as performances extracted by power. The fact is they serve also as a barrier and a veil that the dominant find difficult or impossible to penetrate.”<sup>15</sup>.

Therefore it is a mistake, Scott argues, to see subordinates as “actors perpetually wearing fake smiles and moving with the reluctance of a chain gang. To do so is to see the performance as totally determined from above and to miss the agency of the actor in appropriating the performance for his own ends”<sup>16</sup>. So much for the hidden transcript!

Domination always implies and invokes resistance of one sort or the other. Therefore domination needs resourceful maintenance and constant reinforcement. This then is a key function of the public transcript of the dominant elite – to constantly maintain and reinforce domination, through a variety of acts designed to conceal, euphemise and stigmatise the harsher side of power and control while at the same time seeking to display the power of the dominant through open rituals and ceremonies.

To conclude this section, let me recapitulate. Basically, Scott agitates for, points out to and explores: a space (“sequestered social sites”<sup>17</sup>) for political life which is – in his opinion – seldom recognized in the Marxist and even Gramscian political analysis. This space lies between the ideas of ‘command performance of consent’ and explicit rebellion.

#### **4.2.3. John and Jean Comaroff**

Two jointly written volumes, several individual works as well as works done in collaboration with others have established the Comaroffs<sup>18</sup> as key theoreticians on the question of encounter

between Christian missionaries and Africans. They posit a complex notion of agency for the Tswana interlocutors of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary era. Mindful of the deficiencies in earlier anthropological, historical and missiological studies in this area – especially “the preoccupation with political economy at the expense of culture, symbolism and ideology”<sup>19</sup>, the Comaroffs clearly mean to account for the actions and consciousness of both the “agents” of domination (e.g. the missionaries) and the dominated (e.g. the Southern Tswana). This is a noteworthy point in their methodology. It is a deliberate departure from well-meaning but inadequate studies that merely describe and construct “the re-action and resistance of blacks to the faceless forces of colonization and control [or those recounting]... the efforts of the African working class to ‘make itself’”<sup>20</sup>. This reduces African societies to “structural-functionalist islands without history”... [robbing them of] internal dynamism or agency, (any) organizational complexity or cultural variation....”<sup>21</sup>. Similarly, “the white colonizers, if they are thought worthy of attention at all... [tend to be] treated as a homogeneous class – in and of itself”. It is this situation which the Comaroffs wish to remedy.

What adds value and weight to their work – apart from theoretical erudition – is the empirical basis of the work among the Tswana of Phokeng near Rustenburg in South Africa.

We trace out a colonial encounter of the first kind, the moment when two systems of meaning and action – one imperial and expansive, the other local and defensive – begin to engage one another. The process presents itself most accessibly in letters, reports, and published works... But there is also a discernible Tswana commentary on these events, spoken less in the narrative voice than in the symbolism of gesture, action and reaction and in the expressive manipulation of language. The interplay, of course, was between two parties of incommensurate power, this being reflected in the fact that the evangelists [meaning missionaries] were acutely aware of their capacity to ‘make’ history<sup>22</sup>”

The contents of this quote capture quite aptly the basic theory and

methodology of the Comaroffs. It is an approach that seeks to re-configure and even redefine the power plain between missionaries and local people. In this approach an attempt is made not to dismiss, but to go beyond the written records<sup>23</sup> by offering a theory for both a 'new reading' of these and a gaze towards the local actors – for "the beam of narrative history casts only a weak light on our particular scene, showing us little that we did not already know"<sup>24</sup>. Furthermore, for the Comaroffs what happened between missionaries and local people was an 'encounter' not straight-forward conquest, cultural invasion or a one-way-traffic evangelistic current from the missionaries to the local people, it was also 'a colonial encounter'.

The encounter was between two systems of meaning and being – systems that were equally valid as 'plausibility structures' and held equally dearly by both sets of adherents. In the encounter a lot more than conquest, cultural invasion of Christian evangelism was taking place – the Comaroffs would argue. For this reason, the encounter is branded a 'long conversation' rather than one that produced a conversion of the one group to the system of the other. It was not a benevolent fair-play encounter; the Comaroffs would be quick to point out that it was "a long battle for the possession of salient signs and symbols, [a] bitter, drawn out contest of conscience and consciousness"<sup>25</sup>. In a passage that reveal both their hypothesis and their conclusions, the Comaroffs argue that the main objective of colonizers – missionaries especially – is to

colonize the[ir] consciousness [of local peoples] with the axioms and aesthetics of an alien culture. This culture – the culture of European capitalism, of Western modernity – had, and continues to have, enormous historical force – a force at once ideological and economic, semantic and social. In the face of it, some black Africans have succumbed, some have resisted, some have tried to recast its intrusive forms in their own image. Most have done all these things, at one or another time, in the effort to formulate an awareness of, and to gain a measure of mastery over, their changing world... no wonder that, in our attempt to understand the Southern Tswana past and present, we kept being drawn back to the colonization of their

consciousness and their consciousness of colonization<sup>26</sup>”.

Thus should be understood the ‘long conversation’ between the colonizers and the colonized – a conversation in the process of which “many of the signifiers of the colonizing culture became unfixed ... seized by the Africans and, sometimes refashioned, put to symbolic and practical ends previously unforeseen, certainly unintended ...[inaugurating] a process in which signifiers were set afloat, fought over, and recaptured on both sides of the colonial encounter”<sup>27</sup>. And yet the Comaroffs will not rest their case on signifiers which are constantly and permanently afloat – forever being transformed and interpreted – that would be too post-modernist for them<sup>28</sup>. They argue that “history everywhere is actively made in a dialectic of order and disorder, consensus and contest” so there emerges even in the face of the ‘long conversation’ “a new kind of hegemony amidst – and despite – cultural contestation”<sup>29</sup>.

Therefore, the Comaroffs do not give up on hegemony completely for although the dominated will and do resist creatively and variously “the circle of dominant ideas does accumulate the symbolic power to map or classify the world for others...[becoming] the inertial authority of habit and instinct. It becomes the horizon of the taken-for-granted”<sup>30</sup> – in other words hegemony. The notions of ‘hegemony’ and ‘ideology’ therefore remain crucial theoretical frame-works for the Comaroffs – but they locate these “in an analytical lexicon broadened to include culture and consciousness [and or unconsciousness], power and representation”. Rejecting the simplistic notions about cultural imperialism, they argue that “the colonizing process itself is rarely a simple dialectic of domination and resistance”. Instead of an uninterrupted jump between resistance and domination – even when it is viewed in terms of *infrapolitics*, the configuration is one which posits an almost one-to-one relationship between ‘arts of resistance’ and domination<sup>31</sup>. Refreshingly, the Comaroffs recognize the existence of a realm of the conscious and the unconscious between which there is a “liminal space of human experience in which people discern acts and facts but cannot or do not order them into narrative descriptions or even into articulate conceptions of the world; in which signs and events are observed, but in a hazy translucent light, in which

individuals or groups know that something is happening to them but find it difficult to put their fingers on quite what it is”.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **5.1 Positive Implications for Theology**

The implications of reference to the works of Mosala, De Certeau, Scott and the Comaroffs are many and various. First, this constellation of scholars offers between them enough tools for the construction of clear and coherent methodologies in African Theology. Secondly, if I am correct in suggesting that the most creative dimension of the merging paradigm for African Theology lies in the rediscovery and emphasis on the agency of Africans, then these scholars offer us the most fruitful tools for articulating this agency. Thirdly, these tools have the potential to help both liberation and inculturation theology account for the mythical, popular religious groups – through the manner in which the ethico-political is combined with the socio-cultural. Fourth, Mosala’s refusal to accord total agentic power to AICs; De Certeau’s suggestion that the anti-disciplinary action of consumer networks are not self-conscious combined with the Comaroffs talk of realm and moment at which ‘individuals or groups know that something is happening to them’ without knowing what it is exactly, is a necessary caution against a total valorisation of the activities of the dominated. Fifth, the re-conceptualisation of domination and resistance is and can be a key tool in the rediscovery of African agency.

### **5.2 Some Reservations.**

The emerging discussions around agency are both promising and problematic. The first problem with many of them is that they tend to be propagated by people whose ancestors and themselves were not at the receiving end of the colonial project – except for Mosala whose positioning in the discourse is quite different from the rest in some fundamental ways – in fact he is the foil for the likes of Petersen and others. Is there ground to suspect that this could develop into a belated cleansing of the consciences of the missionaries and the colonizers, by suggesting that they were not in fact all that powerful?



oppress are not completely crushed by oppression? It is one thing when the women say it themselves but quite another when males say it. Secondly, much discourse about African agency runs the risk of glorifying survival and equating it too quickly to strategic and purposeful resistance. Survival tactics must be recognized, but to read too much into them may be counter-productive. Thirdly, not all proposals purporting to highlight African agency actually do that. It is for example debatable whether Sanneh's translation metaphor really highlights the agency and initiative of Africans in their encounter with missionary Christianity and colonialism. Apart from attributing almost everything creative done by Africans to the genius and logic of the gospel, the proposal seems more concerned with the activities of missionaries and colonialists than those of Africans. The Comaroff's also run this risk. Lastly, the risk of legitimising if not glorifying oppression by a blind insistence on agency exists and this is where Mosala's insights must be taken heed of.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at Missio International Consultation: Theme: "The Jubilee Contextualized in Marginalized Africa Today" Uganda Martyrs University, Nkozi, Uganda - 4 May 2000. Original title: "A Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans – Exploring Some Socio-Theological Tools and Insights in the Emerging Paradigm of Post Cold-War and Post-Apartheid African Theology".

<sup>2</sup> This work is fruit of research among the Luba people.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the research - the thirty-day long series of interviews - on which this work is based was conducted among the Dogon people in 1946.

<sup>4</sup> See Emmanuel Katongole's incisive critique of the African renaissance project. 1998. "'African Renaissance' and the Challenge of Narrative Theology in Africa. Whose story/whose renaissance?" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. No. 102 (November 1998), 29-39. See also Mbeki, Thabo 1998. *Africa. The Time has Come*. Tafelberg: Mafube

<sup>5</sup> An African American theologian - Michael Battle - who recently did a PhD on Tutu's Ubuntu theology remarks in the preface that "Tutu is not a theologian, he is better". In saying this Battle was pointing out to the lack of a clear and rigid system in Tutu's theology. However, there were other ways in which Tutu was not a typical theologian, i.e. his theology is also his personal witness and perhaps this is what commends his theology more than anything else.

<sup>6</sup> According to Petersen 1995:34, the ethico-political assumes that: "all theologies and religious practices need to be evaluated in terms of their ethical consequences and their political horizon. I.e. the valuation of these theories and practices in terms of their engagement in and enhancement of the struggle for liberation".

<sup>7</sup> *Weapons of Weak and Domination and the Arts of ...*

<sup>8</sup> Comaroff, Jean 1985, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* Chicago: University of Press.

<sup>9</sup> According to Petersen, *Time, Resistance...* p 100 the Comaroffs, James Scott and Michel de Certeau 'belong together' theoretically: (a) they all are concerned with coded, (b) "All of them, but in very different ways, seek to provide means to read beneath the surface on intentionality, self-consciousness, and overt expressions of". However, Petersen is quick to note that "they all utilize not only different conceptual schema for their analyses, but also understand the key notions of consciousness and agency very differently". cf. de Certeau, Michel 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by S. Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>10</sup> Scott, *Domination* p. 20.

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<sup>12</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts...* p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Scott, *Domination*, p. 17

<sup>14</sup> Scott, *Domination*, p. 18

<sup>15</sup> Scott, *Domination*, p. 32

<sup>16</sup> Scott, *Domination*, p. 34

<sup>17</sup> Scott, *Domination*, p. 20

<sup>18</sup> Comaroff, John L., and Comaroff, Jean, 1986. "Christianity and Colonialism in south Africa". *American Ethnologist*. No. 13, 1-20 Comaroff, John L and Comaroff, Jean 1988. "Through the Looking Glass: Colonial Encounters of the first kind, *Journal of Historical Sociology*. 1:1 (March) 6-13: Comaroff, John L and Comaroff 1989. "The colonization of Consciousness in South Africa". *Economy and Society*, No. 12, 267-295; Comaroff, John L and Comaroff, Jean 1991. *Of Revelation and Revolution. Christianity, colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*. Vol.; 1 Chicago, University of Chicago; Comaroff, John L. Comaroff, Jean 1997. *Of*

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Vol. 2. Chicago: University.

<sup>19</sup> Comaroffs, Vol 1, *Introduction*

<sup>20</sup> Comaroffs, Vol 1. *Introduction*.

<sup>21</sup> Comaroffs Vol. 1 *Introduction*

<sup>22</sup> Comaroffs, 1988, "Through the Looking-Glass...p.6

<sup>23</sup> Although I did use written records, it was these kinds of sentiments from the Comaroffs which inspired me to venture into using vernacular novels, plays, poems and history books in my PhD thesis. Maluleke. Tinyiko San 1995. "*A Morula Tree Between Two Fields*". *The Commentary of Selected Tsonga Writers on Missionary Christianity*. Pretoria: University of South Africa [Unpublished Dth thesis].

<sup>24</sup> Comaroffs, *Of Revelation...* Vol. 1...introduction

<sup>25</sup> Comaroffs, *Of Revelation...* Vol. 1... introduction

<sup>26</sup> Comaroffs, Vol. 1 Introduction

<sup>27</sup> Comaroffs, Vol 1p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Petersen, Robin *Time* , p. 121 notes that the Comaroffs eschew both modernism and post-modernism preferring to define their position as "neomodernist".

<sup>29</sup> Comaroffs, Vol 1. P. 17

<sup>30</sup> Stuart Hall quoted in Comaroffs. Vol. 1

<sup>31</sup> CF Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts*....

<sup>32</sup> This article has been published in the following journals as, "Black and African Theology After Apartheid and After the Cold War - An Emerging Paradigm". *Exchange*. Vol. 29:3 (July 2000), 193-212. "A Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans. Emerging Paradigm of Post Cold-War and Post Apartheid Black and African Theology." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* Issue No. 108 (November 2000), 19-37.

## Igbo Traditional Thought as represented by *Okonkwo* In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

By  
Alexander Ekechukwu.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.<sup>1</sup>

In Yeats' philosophy of history, no civilization can either remain static or evolve forever towards a more inclusive perfection. It must both collapse from within and be overwhelmed from without. Yeats looks at Europe with its two-thousand-year-old tradition of Christian civilization, which itself once made chaos of the values that preceded it and was then collapsing before the inset of something new.<sup>2</sup>

Achebe tries to analyse the Yeatian pattern from the standpoint of Umuofia. Here one finds a civilization in miniature, and the chaos finds its way in through slight flaws in its structure, because the seeds of disintegration are already in and become gradually visible.

The first time we hear of our tragic hero Okonkwo is during a wrestling match:

“The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water... In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat.” (P. 3)<sup>3</sup>.

Apart from the fame gained as a wrestler, Okonkwo has other personal achievements admired by his tribe – three wives, two titles, and large barns full of yams. Though age was respected among the Igbo, achievement was revered. Ottenberg put it this way: “Ibo society is in a sense an “open” society in which positions of prestige, authority, and leadership are largely achieved.”<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising then that Okonkwo had no patience with unsuccessful men like his

father Unoka, lazy and improvident. "He Unoka always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime." (Pp. 3-4). However, Okonkwo's father, Unoka, had many endearing gifts; he was a flute-player of genius and a good companion filled with the joy of life. In violently repudiating all that his father represented, Okonkwo repudiates not only his undignified irresponsibility, but also those positive qualities of love, compassion and sensitivity. These are necessary aspects of the society's code of values, which Umuofia also recognizes as requisite for greatness.

The obsession with proving and preserving his manliness dominates Okonkwo's entire life, both public and private. He ruled his household with a heavy hand. Even in the informal, relaxed story-telling sessions, Okonkwo sees a threat to himself; for these stories will make women of his sons, make them like their grandfather rather than like himself. "So Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his Obi, and he told them stories of the land – masculine stories of violence and bloodshed." (p. 37). Unlike his son Nwoye, he himself had achieved much as a young man. In complaining about Nwoye's unmanliness, Okonkwo says: "A bowl of pounded yams can throw him in a wrestling match." (p. 46).

Reacting against his father's effeminacy, Okonkwo is generally oblivious of the overall balance which the clan ideally maintains between manliness and its opposing principle; an ideal which can be traced from some of their customs and social structures. There is, for instance, the more or less consistent pattern of every male deity mediating with the people through a priestess (e.g. Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess), p 21. And then, also, the custom of return to motherland (for burial or consolation) in cases of death, misfortune, or exile from the fatherland. It is Okonkwo's ignorance of this balance that makes him overvalue manliness setting up a false system of values as a personal ethic.<sup>5</sup>

Initially Okonkwo's fanatical ambition to become one of the lords of the clan, brings quick results; only later does the rigidity of his aims begin to upset the equilibrium of a system developed in conformity with a far less aggressive concept of character. His self-assertiveness



brings in its train a growing alienation between him and his family and his clansmen. The incident which first dramatizes this growing estrangement is the breaking of the week of peace. Furious with his youngest wife for neglecting her duties, Okonkwo beats her severely: "In his anger he had forgotten that it was the week of peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess" (p. 21). His aggressive individualism must be punished and the balance of forces re-established.

To highlight the abomination (*nso ani*) which Okonkwo committed the priest of the earth goddess refuses to share kola nut (caffeine-rich fruit of the cola acuminata): "Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors." (P 21). Among the Igbo, kola nut is a symbol of hospitality. Only a serious rupture in relationship inhibits sharing kola nut together. Holding a short staff in his hand which he brought down to emphasize his point, the Ezeani continued: "We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow" (P. 22). In the end, Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess, defines his crime and imposes the fine, Okonkwo's enemies had something to talk about. "They called him the little bird *nza* who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi*" (p. 22).

The word *chi* is a very controversial topic in Igbo religion. Achebe, perhaps, following Basden, inaccurately calls *chi* "personal god" (p 19)<sup>6</sup>. In my opinion the recent interpretation given by Metuh would be more acceptable to students of Igbo religion. He writes as follows:

The word *chi* used in a religious context, evokes three related concepts namely: the 'Supreme Being', the 'Guardian Spirit', and the idea of 'Destiny' or 'Fortune'. Only the context can show which of the three is uppermost in an Igbo's mind when he uses the word *chi*.<sup>7</sup>

Fully conscious of his own worth, Okonkwo manages to exude an

outer self-confidence. However, underneath that self-confidence lies a hidden insecurity, fear of being considered weak. Ikemefuna's death, at Okonkwo's hands, is the crucial example of the destructive pride, the fearful egocentricity, which compels Okonkwo to prove his "courage" even at the cost of sacrificing a war hostage who had become a member of his own household.<sup>8</sup> The aged Ezeudu warns Okonkwo not to take part in the death of Ikemefuna: "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death... Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him... The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it..." (P. 40). Achebe's oracle of the Hills and the Caves is a reference to the existence of oracles prior to the contact with Western culture. According to Meek, the most powerful of all legal instruments in Igboland were certain well-known oracles which functioned as the highest courts of appeal. The most famous were the oracle of *chuku* at Aro-Chuku, the oracle of *Igwe-ke-Ala* at Umuofia, and of *Agbala* of Awka.<sup>9</sup> Mentioning one of the oracles (*Agbala*) Achebe enumerates why people consulted the oracles: "They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbours. They came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their fathers." (P 12)

It is against this background that one would see Okonkwo's dilemma. Loyalty to the public oracle of the tribe is in conflict with the private loyalties of the home, and there is no chance of reconciliation. Ezeudu proposes the most humane solution – neither defy the gods by resisting, nor offend one's conscience by assisting in the death. But Okonkwo will not accept this casuistic balancing of claims.<sup>10</sup> "He heard Ikemefuna cry, 'My father, they have killed me: 'as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak.'" (P 43) Okonkwo's inner fear renders him incapable of accommodating competing claims. He needs a clearly defined standard of conduct against which to measure his will and achievements; when he cannot find this in Umuofia, he radically oversimplifies the tribal ethic. Obierika expresses the tribe's disapproval of this literal interpretation of the oracle when he is questioned about his absence by Okonkwo:

'Because I did not want', Obierika replied sharply. 'Had something better to do... You sound as if you question the authority and decision of the Oracle, who said he should die.' 'I do not, why should I? But the Oracle did not ask me to carry out its decision.' (p.46).

Obierika seeks reconciliation, or at least a compromise, between conflicting loyalties. Okonkwo, on the other hand, simply wants to fulfil his duties as scrupulously as possible, and his answer to Obierika's warning is irrefutable: "The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger." (p 46). But Obierika is groping for a way out of the *cul de sac*, a more positive synthesis of the dialectical claims than the passive compromise he recommends to Okonkwo. The tribal ethic, however, for all its flexibility cannot provide the answer.<sup>11</sup> By the Ikemefuna incident, the whole tribe and its values are being judged and found wanting.

Though the decrees of the gods are always carried out with dispatch, this does not preclude dialogue, probing, and debate, aptly demonstrated in the pathetic case of Ikemefuna where the parties involved in the conflict are allowed to present their opposing, even hostile views. This democratic model symptomatic of Igbo society is geared towards the maintenance of internal social harmony and good external relations.

In the case which modern lawyers might call "Uzowulu versus Mgbafo", the spirit of traditionalism is shown in clear relief in the adjudication of cases involving members of the same community. The case is heard by the citizens Assembly, presided over by nine masked ancestral spirits (*egwugwu*) representing the nine villages of the Umuofia village group. Typical of Igbo traditional society, here the natural world is penetrated by the supernatural. The adult Umuofian knows that the forms of the nine masked ancestral spirits are those of respected living counsellors. "Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springly walk of Okonkwo... But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves" (p 64). The man in the disguise that depersonalised him, speaks with the supernatural wisdom of the

ancestors.<sup>12</sup>

On the *egwugwu* or *Mmo* Meek writes: "The *Mmo* are... Ancestral spirits personated by maskers who appear in public at seasonal periods, at festivals, and at celebrations of final funeral rites."<sup>13</sup> The case of spirits who speak in esoteric language and judging cases does not have any support from the ethnography of the Igbo. It would seem that Achebe wanted to dramatize the judicial role of patrilineal elders in their capacity as representatives of the ancestors. Through the instrumentality of Evil Forest, Achebe accurately summarizes the aims of Igbo legal process: "we have heard both sides of the case," said Evil Forest. "Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute" (p 66). Oratory is an asset in announcing decisions. On this Meek writes: "The announcers of decisions were always prominent personages at councils or trials. They had usually to be men of good address and to have a sound knowledge of the customary procedure."<sup>14</sup> Proverbs become an asset. Igbo legal process aims to balance the disputing claims in order to achieve justice.

Note that in the "Uzowulu versus Mgbafo" case, Mgbafo is represented by Odukwe, her eldest brother, partly because she cannot as a woman speak before the masked ancestral spirits and partly because her close kin represent her as of right.<sup>15</sup> Here Achebe insinuates the subtle status of woman in Igboland.

The execution of Ikemefuna is the genesis of Okonkwo's decline; for it initiates the series of catastrophes that end with his death. At first cock crow the *ekwe* announced the death of the elder, Ezeudu. Traditional Igbo society had two major news media – through the town crier and by contacts in the village markets. Because he died in a ripe old age his funeral was grand. In a funeral rite to usher him as an ancestor, Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had killed the dead man's son. It was a crime against the earth goddess "The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan..." (P 87). Almost following Meek Achebe writes on this: "Even if a man killed his brother accidentally, he had to fly and remain away for a period of one month."<sup>16</sup> Okonkwo has now become the victim of the tribal values he has one-sidedly been trying to defend. A large crowd from Ezeudu's compound demolished Okonkwo's compound as he fled to

his mother's town. Even Obierika, Okonkwo's greatest friend was with the group. Why? "They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with a blood of a clansman" (p 87). On such incidents Meek writes:

Immediately retaliation was made of the kin of the murdered man ..., and the property of the immediate relatives of the murderer was pillaged... In consequence... the murderer was expected by his own family to commit suicide immediately, in order to save the whole family from attack and their property from spoliation.<sup>17</sup>

In his usual reflective mood Obierika questions the dictates of the inscrutable tribal gods: "why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently?" (P 87). The traditional answer no longer satisfies him. He is rebelling against a system in which two sets of values, the tribal and the personal, are juxtaposed but remain quite distinct: "He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?" (p 87). On the logic behind the treatment of twins Basden writes: "The order for mankind is to propagate by means of single births; there must be a difference between the human species and brute creation. To function as animal is to degrade humanity; a mother of twins is brought down to the level of a common beast."<sup>18</sup>

Obierika first consoles his friend and then destroys his compound; the father of twins must become the goddess' agent and destroy them. The dilemma is additionally painful because one person is frequently required to act both the roles demanded by the double responsibilities.<sup>19</sup> Obierika's reflective rebellion against Umuofia values will be carried to its logical conclusion by Nwoye's defection to the new religion.

Okonkwo brooded over his calamity. His *chi* was not made for great things. Uchenna consoles him with lectures on the symbolism of motherhood. Suffering and sorrow are an integral part of life, however meticulous one obeys the dictates of the gods. Therefore it is the highest of folly to ignore the female, maternal side of the tribal ethic, for this provides the comfort and sympathy which alleviates the

suffering caused by the contradictions and injustice of life.<sup>20</sup> “Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there.”(p 94)

In the meantime the Christian missionaries had arrived in the region and made converts. “Chielo, the priestess of Agbala called the converts the excrement of the clan, and the new faith was a mad dog that had come to eat it up” (p 101). The only disturbing piece of news is that Nwoye has joined the converts. Their teaching gave articulate expression to much that he had felt and never dared to think aloud; for his conversion is partly in response to the shortcomings of his own society. “It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, ... the hymn about brothers who sat in darkness... seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul – the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed.” (P 104). Nwoye was an easy convert, and Okonkwo, true to his character, disowned him.

For Okonkwo, “to abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination”(p 108). The responsibility for performing the final funeral rites which establishes a departed elder as an ancestor falls mainly on the principal heir. Because of his prospects as an ancestor, Okonkwo equated Nwoye’s conversion as an annihilation if all his sons followed him. “He saw himself and his father crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice...” (p. 108). Contrast Okonkwo’s reaction to Nwoye’s conversion to the flexibility and foresightedness of Ezeulu in Achebe’s *Arrow of God*: “I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back... my spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known tomorrow*.”<sup>21</sup>

In Umuofia, flexibility allows room for Christianity which in turn contributes to the passing of the traditional ways. Mr. Brown in an acute discussion with the elder Akunna realised that he cannot win by a frontal attack. Smith’s successor rejects the policy of mutual accommodation.

After seven years of exile, Okonkwo finds that things have changed

in his home village. White missionaries have made converts and white men have also set up a court "Where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance" (p. 123). Doggedly Okonkwo is hell-bent to avert change, to nip in the bud all new influences from outside, lest they enervate his society's values. His sustained incapacity for adjustment or compromise sparks off his final tragedy.<sup>22</sup> Obierika, who understood the mood of the time sums up the changing scene thus:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."(p. 124f.)

The new faith possesses an appeal sufficiently strong to challenge and undermine the old religion. At the same time, through the incentives of the new value placed on palm oil and palm kernels, the acquisitive nature of the society gains precedence. The traditional balance is upset.<sup>23</sup> "Okonkwo was deeply grieved... He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women."(p. 129).

Meanwhile the imprudence of the new converts under the aegis of the tactless Mr. Smith was bringing matters to a head. Mr. Smith suspended a woman for allowing her heathen husband to mutilate her dead child, said to be an *ogbanje* (p. 130). Isichei explains *ogbanje* as a wicked spirit which takes the form of a beautiful child. He is constantly reborn in a family, and constantly dies, tormenting the unfortunate parents. This may be an explanation of sickle-cell anaemia.<sup>24</sup>

The fanaticism of Enoch led to the unmasking of the ancestral spirit (*egwugwu*). In Igbo culture this is an abomination. "The other *egwugwu* immediately surrounded their desecrated companion, to shield him from the profane gaze of women and children..."(p. 131). Umuofia was thrown into confusion for Enoch had struck at the heart

of the clan. The mask of the *egwugwu* epitomizes the duality of roles by which the inscrutable world of the gods and the human world are uneasily accommodated. Enoch's action challenges this strategy.

The *egwugwu* destroy both Enoch's compound and the church, and Umuofia is placated. Through a combination of treachery and naked show of power the District Commissioner arrests the six leaders of the people, offers them no opportunity to defend themselves and then proceeds to harangue them in a speech that contradicts his action: "We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice as it is done in my country under a great queen." (P. 137). The treachery of District Commissioners was so common that as early as 1900 Major Gallway wrote to Sir Ralph Moore in protest: "The practice of calling chiefs to meetings and then seizing them... has resulted in a general distrust of the government and its policy".<sup>25</sup> Corruption of the morals of the colonial officers themselves was one of the fruits of 'pacification'

Okonkwo is infuriated by the treatment he has received. "Before he had gone to bed he had brought down his war dress" (p. 141). This is a chance to redress the mysterious setbacks to his career, the frustration of the years of exile. "If Umuofia decide on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself." (p. 141). Okonkwo hopes to recover his past authority by solving the new problems in the old way. But the old ways are no longer applicable, for the tribe is divided.

In a meeting convoked to discuss the new developments, the head messenger orders the meeting to stop in the name of the white man. With two blows of his machete Okonkwo beheads the man and knows immediately that the tribe will not support his action. "He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape... He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: 'why did he do it?' (P. 144f.)

Okonkwo, seeing that the world he belonged to was dead, went away and hanged himself. His isolation and suicide are inevitable and they provide the final example of the dislocation between the human predicament and the divine decrees.<sup>26</sup> Okonkwo's suicide is, as Obierika explains, an offence against the earth, an abomination. His



clansmen cannot touch him; cannot bury him; cannot consider him one of their own. In death, as in life, Okonkwo's commitment to achievement through violence ostracizes him from the very society he sought so desperately to champion and honour.<sup>27</sup>

Turning to the District Commissioner, in what looks like an epitaph, Obierika said ferociously: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..."(p. 147).

The ethnocentric bias of the Commissioner's imperial handbook underlines the historical inability of the Western scholar to emancipate himself from the usual perspectives on African "primitives". But here, too, Achebe's handling of the colonizer's viewpoint is influenced by the ironic ambiguity with which the African novelist invests his European tools. The white colonist lacks the capacity to perceive the human dimensions of Okonkwo's tragedy. Thus the anthropological machinery of the Commissioner's book will reduce the Igbo warrior to a sensational paragraph on the irrational violence of the "savage". But Achebe's historical novel has used this same machinery to present the "primitive" as a complex human being who reflects, and is a part of, Africa's history.<sup>28</sup> However, as in all human societies, Achebe was not blind to the limitations of Umuofia. As twins were abandoned in the evil forest, *Ogbanje* were mutilated and then dumped in the evil forest; those who died of swelling sickness were abandoned in Evil forest; suicides were buried like dogs; and *Osu* or those consecrated to the service of the gods are denied contact with other human beings and at death dumped in the evil forest.

Our tragic hero, Okonkwo, is not the representative of the Igbo race granted that he is a fully realized traditional character and like other human beings, he has a distinctly individual trait. Judging from this paper by the values of Umuofia his inadequacies are very apparent.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Yeats, *The Second Coming*, Quoted in G.D. Killiam, *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* (London, 1969), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> A.G. Stock, "Yeats and Achebe" in C. : Innes & B. Lindfors (eds.), *Critical Perspectives On Chinua Achebe* (Washington D.C., 1978), p. 86f.

<sup>3</sup> C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Heinemann 1983), p. 3. All quotations and page references in this paper are from this edition

<sup>4</sup> S. Ottenberg, "Ibo Receptivity to Change" in W.R. Bascom and M.J. Herskovits (eds.), *Continuity and Change In African Cultures* (Chicago, 1959), p. 137.

<sup>5</sup> Bu-Buakei Jabbi, "Fire and Transition In Things Fall Apart" In C.L. Innes & B. Lindfors (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. 137f.

<sup>6</sup> G.T. Basden, *Niger Ibos* (London, 1966), p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> E.I. Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion* (London, 1981), p. 22. For more ideas of "Destiny" in West African Religion see Fortes M., *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion*. Cambridge: 1983. For the Yoruba concept of Destiny (Ori) which is akin to the Igbo *Chi* see E.B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London, 1966), p. 171.

<sup>8</sup> L. W. Brown, "Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception in Achebe's Fiction" in C.L. Innes & B. Lindfors (eds.), *op. Cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> C.K.Meek, *Law and Authority in A Nigerian Tribe* (London, 1937), p. 44..

<sup>10</sup> D. Carroll, *Chinua Achebe* (London and Basingstoke, 1980), p. 42f.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

<sup>12</sup> A.G. Stock, "Yeats and Achebe" in C.L. Innes and B.Lindfors(eds), *op.cit.*, p.87.

<sup>13</sup> Meek, *op.cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>15</sup> E. Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society In the West African Novel* (London, 1975), p. 211.

<sup>16</sup> Meek, *op. Cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>18</sup> Basden, *op.cit.*, p. 181. Meek's interpretation is different. The reason for killing twins, according to him, was the difficulty of nursing two children. I would be more inclined to accept Basden's position. It fits better into Igbo cosmology.

<sup>19</sup> Carroll, *op. Cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> C. Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London, 1983), p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Bu-Buakei Jabbi, "Fire and Transition in Things Fall Apart" in C.L. Innes and B. Lindfors (eds), *op.cit.*, p.135.

<sup>23</sup> Killiam, *op.cit.*, p. 30

<sup>24</sup> E.Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London and Basingstoke, 1976), p.26.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in R.M.Wren, *Achebe's World* (Essex, 1980), p.16. In another example of treachery, Jaja of Opobo was forced into exile after being deceived to trust the Justice of the British Colonial officer Johnson. Cf. E.A. Ayandeke, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914* (London, 1966), p. 108.

<sup>26</sup> Carroll, *op. Cit.* P.59.

<sup>27</sup> S. O. Iyasere, "Narrative Techniques In 'Things Fall Apart' In C.L. Innes and B. Lindfors (eds.), *op.cit.*, p.108.

<sup>28</sup> L. W. Brown, "Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception in Achebe's Fiction "in C.L. Innes and B. Lindfore (eds), *op.cit.*, p. 28f.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Johannes Nissen: *New Testament and Mission – Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives*. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 1999. 198 pages.

The author is a biblical scholar. The book is an abridged version of the Danish original published in 1996. The task Nissen set for himself in this small but interesting book is to experiment on a serious conversation between biblical scholars and missiologists. It is an attempt to get beyond the high profile practice among biblical scholars of putting together original linguistic and historical meanings of texts without bias and leaving the task of application to the contemporary world to others like systematic theologians. *New Testament and Mission* turns out to be an experiment in a conversation between text and experience, tradition and situation with all the vigilance demanded by rigorous scholarship so that one does not simply read back into the Bible what one wants the text to say or what one has proposed to do. The temptation of looking for proof-texts is certainly very high among missiologists. However, biblical scholars realise that there is no privileged place of neutrality from which to read the Bible: “It is from within our life-worlds, that we engage in the reading task” [p.15]. Nissen suggests at the outset that instead of looking for proof texts we should rather look for clue texts to interpret contemporary experience, as was the practice of the early Christian community. He brings together as it were the two partners in the dialogue in each biblical book he analysed – presenting first the historical meaning and then the hermeneutical or situational interpretation. In order to carry along the two publics [missiologists and biblical scholars] Nissen consulted a significant cross-section of experts in both fields and, it is to his credit that a good number of theological works from the third world influenced his interpretation. His up-to-date bibliography at the end of the book covers 16 pages.

What one finds refreshing in reading the book is the clear sound of diverse voices of the New Testament on mission. Even though Nissen privileges four aspects of mission in the NT [mission as “being sent out”, “making disciples”, “deliverance and emancipatory action”, and “witness”], he insists that missiologists should be open to the diversity characteristic of the New Testament. He criticises the renowned missiologist David Bosch who, despite the merits of his book

*Transforming Mission*, fell into the trap of privileging three NT traditions, Matthew, Luke and Paul. The summation of Nissen's deference to diversity and its challenge to hermeneutics is found in the concluding chapter of his book in the statement, "If there are biblical forms of mission that fail to correspond to our own idea of mission, then this is precisely where we should pause." [p. 161].

The style and orientation of the author are clear in the first book he analysed, the Gospel of Matthew, which contains the famous Great Commission to "Go", and "make disciples". His analysis favours "make disciples" instead of the more familiar "Go". The espoused pattern of making disciples is sharpened by Nissen's focus on the author of the mission, the risen Jesus, to whom all authority belongs [Matt 28]. Jesus clearly rejected the type of authority proposed by Satan during the temptation [Matt 4], and showed a preference for mission in weakness as opposed to triumphalism. In Nissen's graphic terms [borrowed from Kosuke Koyama] instead of the crusader's "one-way-traffic-religion" Jesus adopted a two-way-traffic with his people, and "in this two-way-traffic situation with his people, Jesus gave up his right of way". In other words in all mission evangelism power must be subordinate to love. The logic derived from this Matthean theology of mission reappears at the concluding chapter where the author assembles all the key themes of mission found in the NT. Facing critical issues of mission like plurality, cultures, and dialogue, the author stresses that the specificity of the Christian message is located in God's love for the world to the very end [John]. The incarnation of the Son of God is only the beginning of a mission which is brought to completion by this love to the end.

Other books Nissen found interesting for projecting the diverse views of mission theology in the NT are the Gospel of Mark, Luke and Acts, John, the Pauline tradition including Ephesians and Colossians. Interestingly Nissen includes in his analysis 1 Peter and Revelation which prove the author's statement that there are opposing theological views on mission in the NT. At issue in the two books is the pattern of Christian engagement in the secular realm. The Book of Revelation prefers resistance without compromise to regimes that are oppressive. It is a type of liberation theology which is non-violent and ready for martyrdom. On the other hand 1 Peter projects the witness of a minority group of Christians who take their distance from society and yet cooperate with the secular realm to bear witness as holy people or the household of God.

A brief summary of what is said in the analysis of each book may help to portray Nissen's competence and contribution to the study of Bible and Mission in our world today.

Mark's theology emphasises mission as discipleship of the cross. But instead of interpreting the infidelity of the disciples or the failure of the women to announce the resurrection as a reprimand, Nissen draws attention to a possible interest of the evangelist on the self-implicatory mission for the readers – a didactic instead of a polemical interest. The reader is challenged to become involved and to carry forward the mission from that point on. One interesting aspect of the Marcan proclamation of the kingdom unto death is crossing the frontiers – sociological and religious rather than geographical frontiers. From an African American perspective this has been interpreted as going beyond sociological frontiers among Blacks and missioning to other racial groups within America.

Luke's two volumes – the Gospel and Acts of the Apostles – show that the time of Jesus and the time of the church are united by the Spirit present and active in both books. The rereading of the Scriptures is shown to be source of mission. Jesus' announcement of the jubilee in Luke as good news to the poor has the project of holistic forgiveness: forgiveness of sin and remission of debts. Mission as forgiveness of sins and solidarity with the poor satisfies both ecumenists and evangelicals. In dealing with the debt burden of the third world the author highlighted the Swede Lutheran Bishops' position that relationship between poor and rich should be seen from the perspective of the poor. The boundary-breaking role of the Holy Spirit in Acts is seen in Peter's meeting with Cornelius and Paul's venture into Athens. Paul's experiment in Athens is far from being a failure, but rather a demonstration of the need for a terrain of equality for genuine dialogue in order to fully listen to the other, not the one-way direction of coming over to us. In this dialogue with cultures and religions the Gospel goes beyond the expectations of the prophets of Israel to be thrust into a cosmological and metaphysical search.

The distinction between *missio Dei* and *missiones ecclesiae* is best illustrated in the Gospel of John where a Trinitarian concept of mission emerges. The basic ground and model of the mission of Jesus deriving from the Father's love is the same model and ground for Jesus' sending of the church. Themes of incarnation and dialogue are tapped fully in the Johannine mission texts. It is interesting that Nissen calls the great Priestly Prayer in chapter 17 of John the great mission prayer. The full

use of logos in John's Christology and his response to many audiences is an attractive model for mission as dialogue in the diversified world of cultures and thoughts of today; one should however not miss the Johannine exclusivism encountered in the 'I am' sayings. One is tickled by Nissen's analysis of the discussion with the Samaritan woman [John 4]. Nissen outlines two characteristics of dialogue that emerge from this conversation – confrontation and change. He continued, "The partners change each other and only the end of their confrontation shows where their dialogue has led" [p.90]. This statement makes the question of inclusivism/exclusivism, and the specificity of the Christian message in dialogue with religions and cultures quite interesting. However, Nissen cannot be accused of excessive radicalism [or liberalism] because the 'I am.' sayings and the folly/scandal of the cross [Paul] cannot be given up in any type of dialogue.

Nissen stresses that Pauline theology and mission are inseparable; Paul's theology is missionary theology. What is inescapable in this missionary theology apart from the overarching emphasis on faith and justification is flexibility as missionary strategy. For Paul, however, one may not compromise the scandal/folly of the cross. This is illustrated in the debate over Christian attitude to pagan sacrificial meat: whether one is weak or strong the Christian's final stand must be in favour of people for whom Christ died. Refreshing for mission today is the attention Nissen draws to the collection for the Jerusalem Church which constituted one of the preoccupations of Pauline mission. While the point today is how to mobilise Christians to contribute money for the poor, Paul's worry was rather how to present the collection without arousing resentment, so that the Jerusalem church may accept it without losing face.

Colossians and Ephesians are not only pastoral texts but also contain mission imperatives. There is first of all the emphasis on cosmic Christology and then the witness of Christian life as life of reconciliation between Jews and gentiles – the mission of the Body of Christ. Nissen's pacifist attitude towards the struggle against "principalities and powers" interpreted as 'systems' is suspect. According to the author Christians are invited not to be seduced by these systems but they are advised not take them head on; Christ has already fought them to a finish. It seems to me that a pattern of mission that is more confrontational towards oppressive systems [through denunciation, advocacy, and plot for the destruction of such oppressive systems – the practice of Africa Faith and Justice

Network, or the radical option of Dietrich Bonhoeffer] would be defensible from the perspective of Ephesians 6:10-20.

In his concluding chapter Nissen assembles various principal trends of mission that are present in the NT characterised by diversity – all of which are a testimony of how God acts in different historical situations. The themes of incarnation, contextualisation and dialogue are important for biblical scholars and missiologists.

This book may upset those who are used to a narrow theology of mission or who prefer one exclusive trend to others. But the book is a welcome contribution to the on-going dialogue and collaborative work between biblical scholars and missiologists. In his search for clues in the Bible [the New Testament] which help the interpretation of the contextual issues on mission, Nissen presents undeniable fresh openings. This book is good for missiologists and biblical scholars.

In a subsequent edition of this book I suggest more rigorous proofreading to eliminate obvious errors in the book. For example, in chapter 6 I note the following errors:

- p. 108, line 13 from the bottom – one should read “successful prosecution” instead of “successful persecution”;
- p. 113, line 16 from the top – one should read, “take advantage of” instead of “take advance of”.
- p. 116, line 11 from the top – one should read, “not a matter of” instead of “not at matter of”
- p. 116, line 13 from the bottom – one should read, “how others react” instead of “how others reacts”
- p. 119, line 7 from the bottom – one should read, “rural people” instead of “rual people”
- p. 124, line 7 from the top – one should read, “On the one hand” instead of “On the hand”
- p. 124, line 10 from the top – one should read, “the acceptance of” instead of “the accept of”.

Apart from these minor errors I believe that this is a book missionaries, pastors, scholars and theology students should have on their shelves.

Elochukwu E. Uzuoku, c.s.sp.

Virginia Fabella & R. S. Surgirtharajah, (Editors.) *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, Maryknoll / New York: Orbis Book 2000; xxiii + 261 pages, Hard Cover.

Introducing this dictionary, the editors themselves assert that it is a unique book. "It is unique in the sense that it is probably the first time that a dictionary has been devoted to issues specifically related to the Third World and its theological concerns, and also the first time it has been written solely by the people normally relegated to the periphery". This declaration sums up, more or less, the peculiarities of this dictionary, and states why it is written. It is presumed that Western theologians wrote other dictionaries of theology, from the perspective of the West, and for the interests and views of the mighty. In contrast, this is a dictionary written from the perspective of the poor and for the purpose of taking care of the specific theological concerns of the marginalized people of the Third World.

The themes and topics explained in this dictionary are customarily approached from the standpoint of the poor and the weak. For this reason, only authors from the Third World or people who share the same experience of being marginalized were allowed to forward entries for this compilation, which makes the perspective of the poor the starting point for the attainment of theological knowledge. This is a revolutionary methodology that has gained acceptance even in history. The true history of oppressed people, some historians would say, cannot be read from the lives of kings, "but in the struggles of ordinary people against the forces of nature and the cruelty of men".<sup>1</sup> Any body who appreciates this point would readily see the justification for the provision of a *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* in addition to many other dictionaries of theology.

According to the editors, this dictionary does not lay claim to definitiveness or authority on all matters relating to Third World theologies. All it does is to explore the theological horizon in our time full of diversity and ambiguity. The editors insist therefore that this work has no political or cultural agenda beside the aim to explain terms and ideas in Third World theologies. By saying that, they surely underestimate the scope of a pioneering dictionary; for, whether it is of political or revolutionary intent, it constitutes by its very nature a definite

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<sup>1</sup> John Iliffe, *The African Poor. A history*. Cambridge University Press 1987, p.1.



and authoritative reference for researchers in the areas of Third World theologies. As such, it must in effect redefine theological knowledge and ideas, reshape images and encourage paradigm shifts.

There is indeed more to this dictionary than meet the eyes. In terms of its conception and availability it is a statement. Its realisation at this point in time is a statement about the maturity and self-consciousness of Christians in various nations sharing a common *spiritual experience* as the oppressed of the world. Just 14 years ago, in December 1986, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) met in Mexico to discuss the theme: “Commonalities, Divergences, and Cross-fertilization among Third World Theologies”. During that conference the difficulties became apparent about identifying common elements among three continents (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) and integrating them into one common theological purpose despite evident divergences.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, the struggle to find an appropriate nomenclature for such a group that cuts across continental and geographical variations, as well as ethnic and cultural differences has been on. A good number of theologians find the term “Third World” derogatory, but they have not been able to procure a better alternative for the classification of the groups of marginalized people from the various continents. There has thus been a non-stop quest for common identity despite obvious differences and a continuous attempt to fashion a new theology for the whole world from the perspective of the poor. All these struggles about the nomenclature, identity and integration of the Third World Theologies into the one theology of the Church seem now settled with the introduction of this dictionary, because, by nature, a dictionary has the ability to standardise meanings and methods, as well as claim authority and authenticity.

This work is a milestone in the development of Third World theologies: for, it unifies the horizon of Third World theologies and provides a common direction and purpose for the divergent and emergent theologies. And it is indeed remarkable, not merely because it emerges from the perspective of the poor, and could be termed the first major declaration of the maturity of Third World theologies, but fundamentally, because it professes and practices pluralism. It ably provides in major entries varied perspectives from various continents to demonstrate the plurality of views that subsists within the Third World theological

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<sup>2</sup> *Third World Theologies. Commonalities & Divergences*, edited by K. C. Abraham, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1990, p. vii ff

domain. This pluralistic approach informs the methodology of the dictionary, which is exemplified in its abundant use of plurals for captions like theologies, Christologies, ecclesiologies, methodologies etc. For central themes like Bible, Christologies, Ecclesiologies, Liberation theologies, Third World Theologies and Third World Women's Theologies, this dictionary samples views from the African, African American, Asian, Caribbean, Hispanic, Latin America and Third World Women theologians in confirmation of its pluralistic inclination. Although this methodology often makes this dictionary look like a comparative study, it makes it exhibit an enviable strength for wielding together the rich ideas from various cultures of the Third World. It fulfils the dreams of EATWOT to speak with one voice and be identified as one in the endeavour to do theology from the perspective of the underside of history.

Another feature of this dictionary is its use of typically Third World metaphors and imagery to illustrate points, making it easy for entries to reflect Third World interests. It includes classical themes, which it reformulates in such a way that they take care of the concern of the spirituality of the marginalized people. It uses new theological paradigms like inculturation, liberation and feminism to illumine ideas that are otherwise ancient. A lot of new subject matter of Third World origin are brought into theological circle in this compilation. Certain issues earlier neglected in theological anthologies like poverty, peace, oppression, capitalism, justice, colonisation, post colonialism, racism, sexism, dependency theory, development, ecology, globalisation, human rights, indigenisation, militarism, solidarity, Third World debt, urbanisation and violence etc. are given prominence in this collection. Entries are carefully written to show the historical, social and theological contexts of the Third World; just as common and classical themes are presented in such a way that the difference between Western and Third World usages becomes obvious.

The *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* shall no doubt prove to be an asset for theologians of the Third World. But much needs to be done yet to bring it to a comprehensive standard. It has lapses. Some fundamental themes are conspicuously absent, especially issues that every contextual theology must presuppose. How can a dictionary of this nature that claims to take care of the inculturation and liberation theologies in Asia and Latin America fail to include entries on Indian Buddhism and Hinduism, Chinese Confucian heritage and Caribbean Voodoo religions. These are religions that influence the approach to

liberation and inculturation processes in those countries. Leaving them out would make their offspring theologies look superficial. Again, some essential Third World theological issues like pluralism, liturgy, prayer, Cross, human suffering, divine suffering, and the Suffering Servant of God are regrettably left out. It is to be hoped that future editions will take note of these omissions. These limitations, notwithstanding, this dictionary is a necessary reference book for all peoples interested in the Third World theologies. The list of selected English-language Journals on Issues in Third World Theologies attached at the last pages of this dictionary is of much value.

Amuluche G. Nnamani (St. Joseph's Parish, Itchi, Box 32 Nsukka, Nigeria)

Joseph-Thérèse Agbasiere. *Women In Igbo Life and Thought*, Edited with a foreword by Shirely Ardner, London and New York: Routledge, 2000. xxvii + 188 pages.

Every artist reproduces her likeness in her work. This may apply to this book by the late Joseph-Thérèse Agbasiere. Unfortunately her book is published posthumously. The author passed away two years before its publication. If she were alive today she would have loved to present to a live-audience, especially scholars, women with university education and in the academia, her views on the Igbo woman and on Igbo customs and traditions contained in greater detail in her doctoral thesis. Fortunately, before her death, she had completed the final draft of the book, drawn from her doctoral thesis, and confided the editing to her friend Shirely Ardner who also wrote a biographical note on this great Igbo woman.

The book is a portrait of the 'authentic' Igbo woman. It is also a portrait of Joseph-Thérèse. This statement may appear contradictory in view of the fact that the author chose a life of celibacy in a religious congregation rather than celebrating the peak of adult maturity as a person and as a woman in marriage. But those who knew her as a nun and an educationist testify that every inch of her bore witness to the portrait of serenity and influence that is the role of the woman in Igbo tradition and culture. To G. T. Basden's disputable comment that for the Igbo 'Celibacy is an impossible prospect' she replied, "Such an interpretation stands in question in the light of a development – that is, the phenomenal

growth ... of the number of young Nigerian women who have embraced the religious life, a key aspect of which is 'celibacy'. Interestingly, this phenomenon is associated more with Igboland than with the rest of Nigeria". [p.94] No wonder the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary honoured the memory of this remarkable Igbo woman by publishing her book produced in hardcover and paperback.

Right from the introduction of the book the author signals that the cultural conflicts created by the dual heritage of the Igbo – the traditional culture and modernity – have to be resolved only by being deeply rooted in the dynamic patterns of the tradition very much alive in Igbo village. As a matter of fact Agbasiere believes in the overriding influence of the village culture on Igbo women. In these times of feminist or womanist revolution, women power or influence, according to Agbasiere should not simply be located or appropriated in the overt expression of power but rather in the covert or implicit domain of human activity. This does not make the influence or the exercise of power less real; indeed the impact is fully felt and acknowledged because of the covert nature of this power. And Agbasiere subtly distances herself from women liberation movements that may overlook creative aspects of culture and context by indicating that the women liberation movements may draw more dignified or calm vitality from the wells of tradition: "I argue below that the Igbo traditional belief-system, especially the aspect of it which deals with the notion of the 'person', shows that Igbo womanhood is an eloquent testimony to 'the will to arise'". [p.4]<sup>3</sup> The wood carving of an Igbo maiden which dates to 1939 and which dominates the front and back cover of the paperback edition of Agbasiere's book eloquently displays the serene influence or exercise of power by Igbo women despite the great trials they encounter in life.

Agbasiere was an anthropologist and a culture-bearer who was not more than an educated informant. She was a woman, and one who was emotionally involved in her culture, especially in regard to its "sensitive zones".<sup>4</sup> Her painstaking study of women metaphors and kinship idioms made her set aside claims by anthropologists studying African women in

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<sup>3</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro together edited in 1992 the provocative collective work *The Will to Arise. Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, Maryknoll: Orbis

<sup>4</sup> The dilemma of the anthropologist who is a culture-bearer is well exposed by V.C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965, p. 10.

general and those who focused on the Igbo in particular that women dominant metaphors derive from their sexual and reproductive status. She was able to show the matrifocal orientation of the basic Igbo kin idiom, and corrected earlier anthropologists, especially Basden, Meek, and Green, who failed to explore the full implications of the roles of lineage daughters [*umuada*] as opposed to lineage wives [*ndinyom*]. This led her to conclude that the woman is primary in the Igbo scheme of things.

One is intrigued how the author tests some anthropological notions among the Igbo. For example some anthropologists hold that “a people’s conceptual categories of the body reflect the particular people’s pattern of social interaction” [p.73-74]. Among the Igbo, Agbasiere narrated, there is the division of the human body as head-centre-end [*isi-afo-ukwu la aka*]. The head or upper extremity denotes the male leadership, the centre or trunk denotes the complex role of the woman, and the end or lower extremity denotes the minors within the kinship. Agbasiere notes that in her place of fieldwork [*Ibi*] meat of animals ritually slaughtered is divided in a kindred or family in that pattern. The interest is not limited to the anatomy of the human person, which the author develops in detail in her study of the notion of person, but in laying down the anthropological principles for family and social organisation. I think that this provides traditional [conservative and yet dynamic] principles which may form an interesting basis for conflict resolution in family and social life. In addition fine points about the kitchen – the domain of adult womanhood – about good and bad food, Igbo menu, about eating well and not eating well, about agricultural products of the Igbo which find their way into the kitchen, form part of the palm oil with which this book is proposed to the public.

Even in the area of cosmology, very well researched by theologians and experts in Igbo traditional religion, Agbasiere has her say. She focused mainly on the fertility divinities led by *Ala*, and especially on the cult of *chi*, the principal focus of women ritual, which may be the most popular cult after *Ala* among the Igbo. She however inexplicably omitted relevant literature in the discourse of the cult of *Chukwu* which she claimed is absent among the Igbo. Metuh’s findings in this matter are totally ignored<sup>5</sup>. Metuh does not even feature in her bibliography. She

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<sup>5</sup> See E. Ikenga-Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion*, London: Chapman, 1981; in the 1999 new edition of his book Metuh restates his thesis on the cult of *Chukwu* among the Igbo and refutes the positions of Donatus I. Nwoga in his

nevertheless makes an interesting contribution in listing and classifying, plants, animals, minerals [especially in the area of colour classification], which will benefit researchers in various fields.

While not giving the author an image of a propagandist or a crusader who proposes to the discontented modern [university educated] Igbo woman and women in the academia that the traditional notions of womanhood [dominant in rural Igboland] is complex, creative, dynamic and adaptable, one will not fail to note a certain missionary angle to the whole book. Agbasiere wanted to address not only Igbo educated women but all women, and possibly create an “awareness of the need to re-examine current approaches to the study of women” [p.8]. Modern Igbo women complain that the woman is valued only as mother and helpmate. Agbasiere counters that patient attention to the context, like in the Ibi village-group she studied, reveals the woman as wife, mother, daughter, and sister. Her multiple roles make her enjoy honour and prestige, the grains of the valuation of person among the Igbo. In contradistinction to the views of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, not mentioned by Agbasiere, who insisted in *Daughters of Anowa, African Women and Patriarchy*, that the many myths, legends and practices found among Africans show that women carry the burden of life and are supposed not to complain: “Women are expected to be the custodians of the positive qualities of the whole community. A person who supports the community’s survival, but does not demand applause and acknowledgement is admired by the African community because, after all, ‘it is one person who kills the elephant for the whole people to feast on.’ While this indeed is expected of men, it is *demanded* of women.”<sup>6</sup> Agbasiere preferred a positive interpretation of woman as “‘gift’ to society, an ethical being who confers some status on man, one who is an upholder of morality”. [p.8] The concept of ‘gift’ is the key to Agbasiere’s understanding of authentic womanhood.

The woman is valued and has influence as daughter [*nwada* – collectively *umuada*] and sister [*nwanne*]. Our author corrects earlier inaccurate notions of missionaries and anthropologists in this area. It is misleading to project the role of women in the political, economic, social and religious domains as purely subjected to the men. The status of the

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*The Supreme God as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought*, Ahiazu Mbaise: Hawk Press, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa. African Women and Patriarchy*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995, pp. 26-29, 33.

woman as daughter that makes her belong automatically to the collective lineage daughters [*umuada*] makes her wield influence in her lineage. The *Umuada* have right of arbitration in practically every matter beyond the power of male relatives to settle, they discipline disobedient relatives' wives, and they may ostracise incorrigible lineage relatives.

In her analysis of the intricate and subtle Igbo kinship terminology, Agbasiere successfully relates the classificatory *nwanne* [lit. child of mother – i.e. 'brother'/ 'sister'] to the matrifocal; a kinship term that is female oriented, evocative of human fertility and motherhood which are overriding values in Igbo life and thought. She concludes that "*nwanne* is a primary kinship idiom" [p.80]. "To speak of kin as descended from a mother, rather than a father, emphasizes the importance of the mother in the kinship system. It shows that while men often trace their descent line through a male (*nna*), they base their immediate links through a woman (*nne*). Even though people designate themselves in terms of patrilineages (*umunna*), still the idea of relatedness is traced through a matrifocal idiom to the one woman at the apex through whom are descended all the members of patrilineages who regard themselves as *nwanne* (collectively *umunne*)" [p.82].

The subtlety of the kinship idiom, a major anthropological contribution of our author to Igbo studies, places her on firm grounds to question the exclusive claim that Igbo are patrilineal. As a matter of fact the lineage or "a social unit consisting of a group of people who can trace actual descent from one ancestor" is made up of *umunne* (brothers and sisters) that form "two distinct categories of members" – "brothers" [*umunna*] and "sisters" [*umuada*]. Both have claims on and obligations to the conservation of the group's identity: this involves ownership of land and property and especially authority and decision making within the lineage [p.90].

The summit of the author's design to project authentic Igbo perception of womanhood is found in her treatment of marriage which is "a fundamental ritual which serves as a religious definition of adult existence"; "the married state itself is seen as the right context for cultivating and disseminating the truth of traditional norms – a task believed to be chiefly associated with the woman's office or life vocation" [p.94]. It is "the greatest and most fundamental ritual act of human existence" which gives one a distinct identity [p.95]. Agbasiere moves beyond the narrow definition of marriage as contract by Igbo and foreign anthropologists to emphasise status and change, conferment of

office, and vocation – a reality that is predominantly female oriented because the woman occupies a central place in the marriage relationship.

Agbasiere tells the story from the female perspective and is very informative about the processes and perspectives of female education. There are two basic divisions – maturity for marriage [*erumogo*] and actual process of marriage [*iludi/ilunwany*]. From the female perspective maturity comes with first menstruation that calls for seclusion and passage rites varying from village-group to village-group. The actual process of marriage begins with preliminary consent of the young woman; then follows the enquiries, tests, scrutinies, the exposure of the young woman which goes with expanding relationship and emerging from the security or protection of the mother's home to a novel environment – the Igbo practice very strict exogamy. The final rite of entering the husband's home not only captures the ideal of a woman's office/mission in marriage but also sums up the authentic female or wifely gesture and the culturally prescribed attitude in male-female roles – “entering in a stooping position into the home of the husband”. She stoops to conquer.

Each step in the marriage ritual process is not only a journey [ordeal] for the girl but also for the mother who shares the blame for any failure of the daughter. Stooping to conquer or to enter the husband's home implies wifely duties towards the husband – going from feeding the husband to protecting the husband's reputation (honour and prestige are the main purpose of marriage). It involves being dutiful and diplomatic in the relationship to the mother in law, co-wives, *umuada* [sisters of the husband], males of the lineage, and especially rearing the children. Curiously the woman is blamed for the misbehaviour of the children – the woman trains children – but hardly gets the praise for their success.

Agbasiere carries her crusading views of the authentic perception of the woman into the practice of widowhood – divided into the prescribed mourning period and the state of widowhood [for those who do not take the levirate marriage]. Widowhood has been described in the most obnoxious of languages by authors, male and female. The ordeal of widows in Nigeria and Africa has called for the reform of the customs and practices. Pat U. Okoye in her book with the telling title, *Widowhood: A Natural or Cultural Tragedy*, gives a graphic description of this tragedy from one region of Africa to another, from one section of



Nigeria to another.<sup>7</sup> But Agbasiere inserts the Igbo practice within the general perception of rites of passage to reaffirm the solidarity of the kinship system. She introduces a creative interpretation of the prescribed widowhood [*ikwadi*] and widowhood state [*ikwa-ajadu*], following Fortes, as taboos that go with office-holders and accountability of office. She noted that elders in Ibi where she did her fieldwork interpret the practice in all its dimensions as *omenala* (customs of the land) while the women interpret the ordeal with the general term of *ijedi* (journey of married life – one of the ordeals of marriage). Agbasiere notes the dependency of the widow during the prescribed period – especially the one native year of mourning [7-9 calendar months]. She narrates the subhuman treatment the widow undergoes. For example “total confinement indoors”, “sitting on the bare floor [that] is maintained for at least 3 months. She may not even get up to fend for herself but is fed by others. Formerly she did not bathe herself during this period, but her face could be washed by the *umuada*”. And for the three months the widow may be wearing as mourning dress “tattered pieces of coarse woven material, covering just the thighs” [p. 147]. All these and more (including the humiliating carping by the *umuada*) our author interprets as *ijedi* – journey of married life, the moral dimension of office, accountability required of office-holders, liminal experience prior to induction into office and needed for reintegration, a gradual re-orientation, reassertion or reconstruction of female identity, and the proof that the woman is life restorer or regenerator [7-9 months confinement].

There is no doubt that these interpretations are interesting for a development of a spirituality of widowhood, but our author has failed to take seriously the resentment of women [and men], of those modern widows with salaried jobs who not only find the long duration of mourning impracticable but the dependency on the brothers-in-law intolerable. Agbasiere has succeeded in explaining the thinking behind the taboos and rituals – accountability to the kindred, to other women, to the earth spirit, etc. – but she certainly has not considered the fact that fundamental human rights of people are at stake in the rituals and practices that dehumanise widows and women. Passage rites for widows to reconstruct the self and to account to humans and spirits about their role or office in society are necessary but the crudity of the practice and the one-sidedness of the experience call for reform and justice. Agbasiere

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<sup>7</sup> Pat U. Okoye, *Widowhood: a Natural or Cultural Tragedy*. Enugu: NUCIK Publishers, 1995, especially pp. 82-88.

has given us the fundamental elements for the confrontation of the traditional with the modern. That adaptations are already in place among many village-groups show the general awareness of the need for reform in this matter.

But we must get back to the project of Agbasiere: from the 1920s women have been 'watchdogs' of morality challenging any form of injustice, lack of commitment and accountability in the leadership. Today they should continue to do the same. Her interpretation of the 'journey of married life' [*ijedi*] as exemplified in widowhood may indicate moral leadership by example.

This book is about women. Men feature only indirectly. Certain claims need to be clarified or call for more developed study. Also certain omissions in the issue of power sharing need to be addressed by students and colleagues of Agbasiere. One of the most arresting statements is contained in the opening paragraph on the notion of person: "The Igbo notion of the person accentuates a sense of personal responsibility to oneself and for one's actions. This view is more associated with women than with men" [p. 65]. There is very much emphasis on the responsibility of the women in providing food, in farm work, in nurturing, in arbitration, and especially in upholding morality. What is the role of the men? This may require a book similar to that of Agbasiere and written by men and women. Agbasiere has drawn our attention to the necessity of paying close attention to cultural traditions and how they exist in each context. She has drawn our attention to the fact the women liberation movements need to pay close attention to these cultural traditions. Her position must be complemented by views of other women researchers who insist that those cultural patterns and values when applied to all humans as humans without distinctions as to sex advance the cause for liberation in the community<sup>8</sup>.

This book is a must in the hands of every woman, every Igbo, every anthropologist, every leader. There are eight pages of bibliography to facilitate continued research, and also a good index, 8 plates and 4 maps to facilitate reading.

Elochukwu Uzukwu c.s.sp.

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<sup>8</sup> M. A. Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective", in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1994, pp. 174, 176.



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